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Embedding Ethics in Creative Writing Teaching

Alexia Casale

Provocation: Ethics (and related research skills) should always be embedded in creative writing teaching.

This practice-focused article briefly outlines the argument for embedding ethics in creative writing teaching, then explores a range of questions teachers can ask of themselves and students to promote deep, active learning across levels of study.

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In creative practice, the capacity and ability to act ethically is more important than advanced theoretical knowledge. Not only does this approach save the need to find time in busy programmes to teach ethics, but it recognises that ethics are fundamental—good creative practice rests on an ethical foundation that mediates complex and sometimes contradictory challenges in a context characterized by uncertainty. As such, ethics should be an ongoing touch-point instead of a specific, discrete concern.

Scholars have recognised the importance of active learning since the earliest days of Developmental Psychology and the formal study of pedagogic practice. Piaget claimed that to tell children something was to prevent them from discovering it for themselves, while Bloom's Taxonomy is predicated on the idea that as learning becomes more active and embedded, it becomes deeper and more lasting. Practical, authentic tasks support active, embedded learning and enable learners to innovate and create not merely regurgitate—this is why most creative writing programmes focus on exercises, prompts, and workshoping.

Embedding ethics in authentic, active learning is as simple as drawing out the ethical implications inherent in almost all dimensions of creative writing. The simplest way is by identifying the core ethical elements underlying the aspect of craft or practice being explored in a specific lesson or task. For instance, asking students to write about a real event (especially one in living memory) provides opportunities to discuss ethics regarding characterisation (will your protagonist be fictional or a real person?), plot (which aspects of the story will you tell and which will you leave out?), and theme (how will you frame the story?). Even if higher-level issues are not explored in the following discussion (e.g. what elements of a true story should you feel free to change as a fiction writer?), there is rich scope at a purely practical level to challenge students to think deeply about a range of ethical dimensions.

When framed through the lens of the potential harms unethical storytelling can do, even small children can grasp ethical concepts—and why they matter.

What if someone wrote a story about what you did this morning and said it was true but the story was about you stealing your best friend's favourite thing? How

would that make you feel? Do you think it's OK or do you think it's wrong for someone to write a story like that? What if the person didn't say the story was true?

For older students, the questions might move from 'If something bad happened to you, how would you feel about someone writing a novel about it? What would you want them to do and not do in terms of research and how they write the book?' to 'How about if someone wanted to write about one of your grandparents? Would it be different if it was a deceased great-grandparent?' Discussions of this sort can tease out questions about different sorts of harms (e.g. if the people involved in a 'true story' is still alive and/or their loved ones are), and what can mitigate harm (e.g. research). Critically, it necessarily opens the door to discussions about ethical research, especially if you then set your students the task of writing a recent 'true story' while being mindful of how they'd feel if someone were writing about them/their family.

The issues become more vexed and complex at higher levels of study where publication is usually a possibility if not an overt goal. A useful task involves pairing students and asking them to tell each other a story about an upsetting but non-traumatic event they experienced as a child, then writing a story based on their partner's account. The mutual vulnerability and mutual power experienced in the role of 'writer' versus 'subject of the writing' gives students direct insight into both the challenges of being responsible for telling someone else's story (including how that person might react to the telling) and the challenges of being written about. This sort of task provides an excellent 'hook' to explore the principle of informed consent at an age-appropriate level of complexity.

Naturally, such tasks also open the door to explore not just the range of methods and types of data that writers might work with for different stories but how to take a critical approach to evidence. A useful task involves giving students a piece of second-hand reportage about a famous historical event and asking them to write a story inspired by it, then giving them a first-hand account and asking them what they would do to change their initial draft. Would they merely add details or would they think again about how different people experienced the same event—and what factors might make different people choose to tell very different versions of the same story? Examining an event where there are no first-hand accounts from one or more entire groups of the people involved helps to demonstrate not just issues of bias and the importance of positionality, but also how power interacts with ethical concerns, including by determining what evidence is preserved and who gets to tell a specific story.

Contextualising ethical principles through their practical application demonstrates that just as writing is a process, the ethical considerations that underpin it are similarly dynamic, involving different elements at different stages, many of which need revisiting over time. Each encounter with ethical challenges enhances knowledge and skills, especially when reflective practice draws explicit lessons from on-going experience. Ultimately, what matters most when it comes to ethics is not good intentions at one point in time, but good behaviour across time.

As students engage progressively with activities with explicit ethical dimensions, so it becomes easier to facilitate richer theoretical and philosophical discussions about the underlying principles. From ‘How do I write this story the right way?’ we come to ‘What is the ‘right’ way?’ Asking the bigger questions empowers students to develop a personal stance that unites moral values with professional practice.

Creative practice is characterised by ‘grey areas’ and uncertainties. In a context where most elements are subjective rather than objective, and there are few straightforwardly ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers, ethical practice provides a framework to structure practice such that the odds of getting it ‘right’ are increased and the risks of getting things ‘wrong’ are mitigated.

In accredited learning, the embedding of ethics in creative writing teaching takes on additional dimensions vis-à-vis quality assurance standards, and the governance and policy frameworks that motivate and check compliance. In Higher Education, most programmes have accredited intended learning outcomes relating to transferable skills and discipline-specific employability knowledge. A practical understanding of ethics—and concurrent experience-based skills in how to act ethically—embed an authentic grasp of how to align behaviour with professional and personal values as well as professional standards.

To be ethical (rather than just to know about ethics) involves skills in research, problem-solving, risk management and mitigation, critical thinking, and more. This is rich territory for boosting employability and demonstrates just how much value embedding ethics in discipline-specific learning brings with it.

In Creative Writing, tasks and practical activities that build on each other scaffold how ethical practice offers a foundation for creative practice. Just as writing involves conceptualising, development, drafting, solo editing, editing with feedback and more, so ethics plays a role in mediating different challenges and concerns at different points.

Critically, different ethical considerations adhere when working with an agent and/or publisher: a key element of boosting employability through embedding ethics involves helping students understand and parse how the publishing industry tackles ethical issues. A helpful task involves asking students to identify a common ethical theme in key publications like *The Bookseller* or *Publishers’ Weekly*, then to examine the same theme as explored in discussions on social media, book-blogs and/or review sites like Goodreads. What ethical issues is publishing considering, and what issues is it ignoring? Is the debate rounded or partial? Are there differences in how publishers, agents, authors, bookseller, librarians, teachers, readers and other stakeholders approach the same ethical issue? How does publishing currently tackle different ethical challenges, and what are the pros and cons (practical and inherent)? For instance, what are the tensions in ‘sensitivity reads’, and how should the roles of sensitivity reader, author and publisher be mediated when there are no professional standards to bring to bear? When publishing treats sensitivity readers as a panacea, what is ignored and what are the consequences?

This is rich territory not just for exploring ethics but the challenges of a creative career requiring negotiation between artistic practice and the pragmatic reality that publishing is a business. Giving students the opportunity to hear from published authors about their ethical stances, the ethical challenges they've faced and surmounted, and the continuing professional development they've undertaken to enhance their practice, is invaluable in helping students grasp the foundational nature of ethics in a creative career.

Other good ways to embed ethics include through activities involving literary criticism. Take a book like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, then challenge students to consider its ethical dimensions.

Why did he call it a 'non-fiction novel'? Can a 'novel' be 'non-fiction'? How does this framing speak to Capote's ethical stance?

Alternatively, why not look at *The Salt Path* and the book's original press and publicity, then the press and publicity (including recent documentary) about the likely falsehoods.

What are the ethical considerations inherent in the work, and what are the considerations that emerge specifically from the story being promoted as true?

What does 'true' mean here? To what extent should 'truth' be framed as a moral and/or ethical duty of the author?

For teachers looking to convey broader considerations, *13 Reasons Why* is a useful option.

Does the book respond to the extensive literature on writing responsibly about suicide and self-harm? What does close reading reveal about specific failings and/or successes? What research should an author do when writing about issues like mental health struggles, and to what extent should this impact what they write and how they write it?

Ethics is a field of questions with few absolute answers, especially when it comes to creative writing. Ethical practitioners question, learn and reflect as a means for striving towards the most ethical behaviour they are capable of at any point in time.

Creative writing almost always involves ethics

The argument that creative writing teachers have a duty to embed ethics relies on the assumption that ethics are relevant and important in all creative writing. As this article shows, this is easy to demonstrate when it comes to any moderately complex narrative, but even most smaller works involve at least some ethical issues, whether about what is written, how and why, or what impact it has on readers and, through them, the wider world.

It seems unlikely that any undergraduate Creative Writing course nowadays could fail to examine issues of representation, particularly in terms of writing inside/outside lived experience. Here there are craft considerations, industry considerations, and readership ones: underpinning them all are ethical considerations, whether this is ever

made explicit or not. However, this *should* always be explicit. In order to make informed choices as writers, we need to understand everything at stake.

Even small children can grasp the basic ethical considerations concerning representation if these is presented in questions like ‘How would you feel if someone wrote a story describing you in a way that was mean or untrue?’ While it is progress that publishing is taking issues of representation seriously, the fact that it is doing so primarily on an ad hoc basis in response to loud, public controversies has meant that instead of a rounded, serious consideration, debates and solutions are often partial and shallow.

Representation is a vexed field. Inaccurate representation does not just offend but can feed into systems of marginalisation and oppression by reinforcing false narratives, stereotypes and misinformation (Cosgrove, 2009). However, a partial conversation neglects the fact that just as there is an ethical duty to strive for ‘accurate’, ‘non-harmful’ representation—in full recognition of how complex it is to determine what that means in practice—there is a concurrent ethical duty to represent real-world diversity.

In 1988, Emily Style introduced the idea that fiction provides readers with “mirrors and windows”: “mirrors” in the sense that writing can reflect our selves and our realities, and “windows” in that it can provide a window onto other people and their lives. Rudine Sims Bishop expanded on Style’s work in 1990 by arguing that writing can also provide “sliding-glass-doors”: a way to imaginatively step into another person’s shoes and gain a vicarious experience of other lives. For fiction to provide mirrors, windows and sliding-glass-doors to all reader, with all the concurrent implications for enhancing empathy for ourselves and others, it must be diverse.

Neuro-imaging studies substantiate claims that reading enhances empathy through vicarious, imaginative experience: in fact, it demonstrates that reading is one of the most effective means we have of boosting empathy. However, the literature also demonstrates that not all writing is equal in this regard. This raises thorny ethical questions. Do writers have a duty to try to maximise the extent to which their work enhances empathy? Does this vary depending on the nature of the writing involved?

Ethics provides a framework for striving to represent well while simultaneously striving to represent diversity in recognition of the complex challenges of writing both inside and outside our lived experience. ‘I want to write a book with a visually impaired protagonist, but publishers might object because I’m not visually-impaired myself: what should I do?’ is the type of question students regularly pose. However, if we help them discover better questions, we can guide them to make choices that unite craft and artistry, industry understanding, and their own values. If we can empower students to ask questions like ‘Why do I want to write this book and how can I proceed in a way that will satisfy my artistic impulses and not limit the likelihood of publication?’ we simultaneously empower them to take ownership of their ethical duties and the development of a personal ethical stance. Alongside this, we must empower them as independent learners through enhancing their understanding of research as a means to deliver on their values.

By MA level, we can tackle even more complex questions about genre and form.

Do writers of historical fiction have a duty to be truthful about the facts? What facts can be changed without this being unethical? What is 'fact' and what is interpretation of fact?

If a novel positions itself as historical, as opposed to alternative history, does this shift the writer's ethical duties?

If writing fantasy as opposed to historical fiction, are there ethical duties regarding whether elements of real-world oppression are replicated or not?

At higher levels of study, particularly postgraduate research, there is mileage in examining a range of ethical frameworks, from critiques of ethnography to narrative ethics (Dicks, 2023, offers a helpful summary), and from how creative writing can contribute to mental health and wellbeing to the ethical duties inherent in biography and memoir.

While most universities now provide researcher development training at PhD level (as required by the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and the Vitae framework, the UKRI Good Practice Principles in Recruitment and Training at Doctoral Level and the Statement of Expectations for Doctoral Training), there are significant disparities between institutions regarding the degree to which general ethics training is explored through a discipline-specific lens.

This impacts whether PhD students in Creative Writing are required to explore ethical considerations at all if their work does not require ethical approval. As a result, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is common for ethical issues to be raised at examination.

Often this relates to fictionalised elements of the student's life or their family's history. For instance, there are ethical implications when an author purposefully names a character after a family member (in one example, the protagonist's brother was named after the writer's brother, only the fictional brother had committed suicide and the real brother was still alive). Similarly serious ethical issues are raised when a story reveals things about a real person that other members of the family were not previously aware of (this often involves issues of domestic violence or child abuse). What rights do other people in the family have in respect of such situations? What if a family discusses the planned creative work and agrees a specific approach then someone changes their mind? Students as writers and researchers need to leave room for discovery and development. Equally, family members may change their minds about giving consent after seeing the creative work for the first time.

Examining common unintended consequences of these sorts, and mitigating the risks for all involved, is an ethical duty: a PhD by creative practice is a research degree and, as such, ethical obligations apply, albeit they present in discipline-specific ways. Just as students have ethical duties, supervisors have commensurate duties to support students in wading through the murky waters of creative ethics; when publication is a possibility, they should also consider if they have an additional duty in respect of ensuring students understand the potential legal implications.

Moreover, when dealing with auto-ethnographic methods, life-writing or deep reflection on traumatic experiences, the PhD student becomes a research participant. The fact that consent is implicit in continuing with one's own work does not vitiate the ethical duty that consent be informed: if it is implicit, it cannot be meaningfully informed. Even when universities support students to consider ethical matters, such as how to mitigate mental health risks when mining traumatic experiences for research, consideration often stops there, even though there are likely unintended consequences that merit exploration. For instance, supervisors and students should discuss how to protect the student's wellbeing in the context of exploring real, traumatic events from a critical perspective: even if there is a degree of therapeutic purpose, this may conflict with the requirements of PhD study in terms of rigour. Parsing these complex matters will not produce clear answers, but the fact of exploration *is* the ethical duty.

These are complex matters with few right or wrong answers, except that it is wrong to undertake research, including creative practice research, without engaging with the relevant ethical consideration.

Call to action

Empowering students to embed ethical principles in their creative practice is a core responsibility for teachers of creative writing. It also offers active, authentic opportunities to boost employability, including by introducing students to research concepts that will empower them as lifelong independent learners able to actualise their values across all dimensions of their creative practice. Collectively, ethical knowledge and skills provide a framework for negotiating the vexed relationship between creativity and business while maintaining artistic, professional and personal values. Ethical practice as a foundational part of creative practice is the ultimate 'virtuous circle'.

For those looking for a way to quickly and easily start to embed ethics in their teaching, here is a simple call to action:

Identify 1-3 tasks that will embed ethics learnings through practical experiences.
Identify 1-3 principles or elements to tease out in discussion, and a follow-on exercise for each.

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Biography

Dr Alexia Casale is an author of Middle Grade (Bloomsbury), Young Adult (Faber), and adult crime (Viking/Penguin Random House) fiction, as well as a Reader at Bath Spa University, where she leads the MA Writing for Young People and MAWYP Online. Her portfolio career takes in dramaturgy and script-consulting in theatre, film and TV, as well as specialist non-fiction editing, with a focus on violence against women and the prevention of torture. She has a particular interest in how fiction can enhance empathy and support the embrace of human rights.