Letting it all spill out: the benefits of venting for creative writing teachers and students by Gráinne Daly, Francis Gilbert and Peggy Riley

Biographies

Gráinne Daly

Gráinne Daly is an Irish Research Council funded PhD candidate in University College Dublin. She teaches Creative Writing at UCD and is a volunteer learning assistant in the Museum of Literature Ireland. A multi-genre writer, Gráinne's work has been published in numerous publications. She is the 2019 winner of the UCD Maeve Binchy Travel Award. Sport in creative literature is her primary research interest and her doctoral research includes an examination of sport and remembrance culture in Irish literature.

Francis Gilbert

Dr Francis Gilbert is a Lecturer in Education at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he is Head of the MA in Creative Writing and Education and course leader for PGCE English. He has taught creative writing for many years and has published novels, memoirs, social polemics and educational guides. He worked for a quarter of a century in various English state schools teaching English, Drama and Media Studies to 11-18-year olds before taking up his post at Goldsmiths. He has appeared many times on radio and TV talking about schools and universities, including Newsnight, the Today Programme, Woman's Hour and Channel 4 News. His most recent publications include the audiobooks of his novel *Who Do You Love* (Blue Door Press 2020) and educational commentary *Analysis and Study Guide: Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (FGI Publishing 2014).
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Peggy Riley

Peggy Riley is a writer, playwright, and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Canterbury Christ Church University. She has been published by Elle, The Big Issue, the Wall Street Journal and the 2021 Janus Literary Story Prize Anthology. Her plays have been developed and produced at venes including BAC, Jermyn Street Theatre, and The Old Red Lion. Her short fiction was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize, the Mslexia Short Story Competition, and the Costa Short Story Award. Her first novel, *Amity & Sorrow,* was published by Little, Brown and Headline/Tinder Press and translated for publication in France, Italy and the Netherlands.   Most recently, her essay "A Heartbeat" was commissioned and published in a new anthology for Elliot & Thompson, *The Best Most Awful Job.* She was a writer-on-attachment at Soho Theatre, a Yaddo fellow, and a recipient of a Grant for the Arts from Arts Council England. She runs an online student writing group, The Writing Circle, and can often be found on Twitter, extolling the power of morning pages and #amwriting.
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Abstract

The need to provide solutions to pandemic deterritorialized teaching took effect almost overnight in early spring 2020. There was an immediate amplification of digital literacy requirements. The need for multi-modal fluency and connectivity intensified throughout the pandemic and its effects were felt nowhere near as profoundly as in education. Overnight new learning systems had to be designed and implemented. New technology needed to rapidly be acquired and shared. Teachers had to redesign teaching curricula so that content would be fit for the new modes of delivery that was emerging. Students and teachers were inundated with 'new' as innovation became a key force underpinning the production and consumption of pedagogy. The challenges were many, and how we approached the challenges became vital to our survival and success within a period of monumental distress. This research looks at three models that were used to assist teachers in managing expectations during the pandemic.

Prologue by Peggy Riley

Can you hear me?
The race to move online during lockdown was overwhelming. With one eye on the news and the other on the timetable, nobody knew what to do or when to do it.
Can you see me?
There were systems in place, but no one knew how to use the software – or if they did, no one had the practical knowledge to know how – or even if – it would really work.
Are you there? Is this thing on?

Now, we probably all take online learning in our stride. It has become second nature, but that doesn't mean it's not still strange. I mean, we have students in our kitchens now. Students in our bedrooms. I dream screens – and I bet that you do too.
Can you understand me? Is this even making sense?

Introduction by Gráinne Daly

A precursor to this paper was presented by Dr. Francis Gilbert, Senior Lecturer in Education at Goldsmith's University, at the National Association for Writers in Education Conference (NAWE) in March 2021.[1] Gilbert's work raised awareness of the potential for modelling as a framework for reflection by stakeholders in virtual learning environments. A research team consisting of Dr. Francis Gilbert, Peggy Riley of Canterbury Christ Church University, and Gráinne Daly of University College Dublin was established to carry out a case study that sought to appraise three frameworks for reflection against their experience of teaching creative writing through the pandemic. Those models (with very brief elucidations which are explained later on) are:

- Venting (expressing emotions about online learning)
- Circumplexing (mapping emotions in terms of positive/negative, & high and low energy states)
- The Learning Pit (diagraming/drawing problems and how to solve them)

Since March 2020, we have been wedded to online teaching for better, for worse. The challenge to switch overnight from analogue teaching landed on our desks with no warning. Amid varying degrees of digital literacy, we were tasked with designing models of multimodal teaching and with switching our existing courses to automated versions. Institutions doled out access to platforms such as Zoom and prescriptions for all for digital crash-courses. Learning how to teach in a new language: that of a Zoom/Brightspace/Google Meets (or other) combination, was exciting and daunting. Multimodality and pedagogy were pushed together with unprecedented speed and may have changed the face of teaching and learning forever. Uncertainty underpinned how students and teachers felt throughout the period. "*Certain uncertainty* is an oxymoron at the heart of reflective practice… The only way to get anywhere in reflection and reflexivity is to do it, trusting the journey." (Bolton and Delderfield: 232) The Venting, Circumplexing and Learning Pit models were employed to empower users to chart their way through this '*certain uncertainty*'. The case study sets out the ways in which these

innovative creative models for reflection were used. For this article, each researcher has commented upon the aforementioned three key foci.

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[1] ,Gilbert, F. 'Research Informed Approaches to Teaching Online', 13.05.2021 (Conference presentation) https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/conference-2021-3/research-informed-ways-of-teaching-creative-writing-online.htmlVenting

Let's Vent! by Gráinne Daly

Venting is a form of action research in which "practitioners study their own social situation to improve the quality of action within it." (Bolton and Delderfield 2018: 67) In managing my frustration at some of the factors that were affecting my teaching practice, I adapted a process of charting my frustrations in a notebook at the end of each class. After a couple of weeks, I could see patterns emerge: I was growing impatient with a lack of engagement by some students; I felt the 'wifi connection is bad' excuse was wearing thin when it came to not having class reading or homework done; I was not happy with persistent lags on the line when some students were asked for their input. This lag was down to a combination of a delay in mute being turned off or poor connection or a reluctance to participate in live discussions on Zoom. In short, I hadn't managed to account for the fact that some students did not like the digital platform and that they too were extremely stressed. I decided to schedule five minutes at the start of every class for a communal 'vent'. It was our 'talk time', where I invited good news, publishing news or just an update of how everyone had been through the week and what challenges they had met. This worked. I met the students on a level at which they were willing to engage: we all felt under pressure and sharing our story can help. From then on, we continued to write together using supported group processes with a strong emphasis on reflective learning. Additionally, I developed a poetry exercise to facilitate this venting model and invited my undergraduate classes to embody the characters of their frustrations and let it inspire them to write their own poems as expressions of where they were at in their writing processes. This threw up some interesting creative work and was a positive use of the vented energy as a tool of self-reflection with regard to their creative writing. We initially vented collaboratively on Zoom Whiteboard which was a ludic exercise students enjoyed. They graffitied the screen with their frustrations and in turn, I populated them into a word cloud for the class to use as an inspirational graphic in writing their 'venting' poetry. We vented in some form every week in a

safe and supported environment and this fostered compassion, empathy, trust and self-respect within each group. It was a very valuable tool over the past three semesters of virtual teaching.
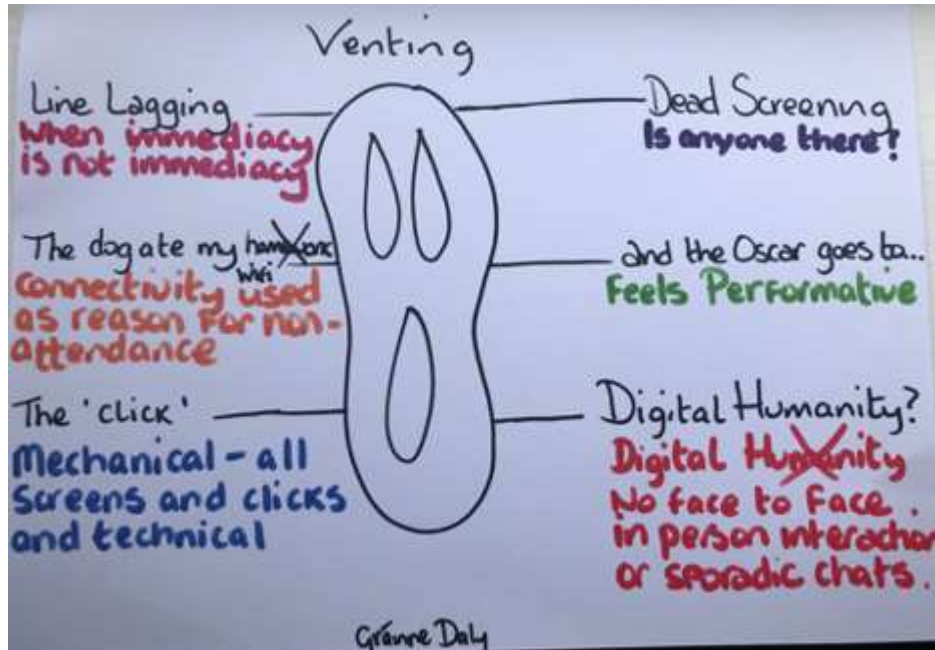

Figure 1 Example of Gráinne Daly's venting

Francis Gilbert's venting

During lockdown, I vented every day in a handwritten diary. I used a notebook which has a QR codes on every page which means I can easily scan my pages into PDFs, and keep them stored online.

This act of handwriting and drawing in an entirely private way was (and still is) liberating for me; I know I won't show the diary to anyone else. This privacy made me feel free to say what I want to myself. I can look at the diary easily on my phone, track back and see what I was thinking and feeling months ago. This has proved useful, not only as a record of what's happened to me, but to understand how I've learnt and grown as a person – or not!

Before handwriting and scanning a diary, I used to type a diary on my computer. For me though, handwriting is more therapeutic: I see more clearly and quickly what is going on in my life. I feel often better after handwriting compared to writing on a computer screen. Furthermore, I perceive, re-reading my material, that I am more creative and interesting in my handwritten diary versus my digital one. Comparing the two diaries (the handwritten vs the computer one) I notice

that my handwritten diary is more incisive, less full of extraneous detail, and much more enjoyable to re-read.

Above all, handwriting gives me the chance to vent; I can express my emotions through the size of my words, through my drawings, through the different qualities of my handwriting, printing or joining up letters when appropriate. I find that I can confess the more embarrassing stuff using handwriting; it can be done through things like concept maps (see Figure 1), where every mark and absence of a mark is significant. What do I unconsciously circle and why in Figure 1? What do I put in a box and why in Figure 1? These are important metacognitive questions to ask of myself, to prompt me to think more deeply about my writing processes.

Venting is about being reflective – looking back at events – and reflexive – understanding your place in the world (Bolton & Delderfield 2018: 9). Once you confess to feeling a certain way, you gain a sense of perspective, particularly if it is written down; you capture a feeling and can begin to see its causes. Venting in a private diary affords a safe space to own and accept your emotions. This is what I have found, and this is why I have found it helpful while teaching creative writing during lockdown. I have shared my enthusiasm for it with my students (mainly postgraduate trainee teachers and creative writers), and many of them have reported to me that it's been the one thing that's really helped them through difficult times.
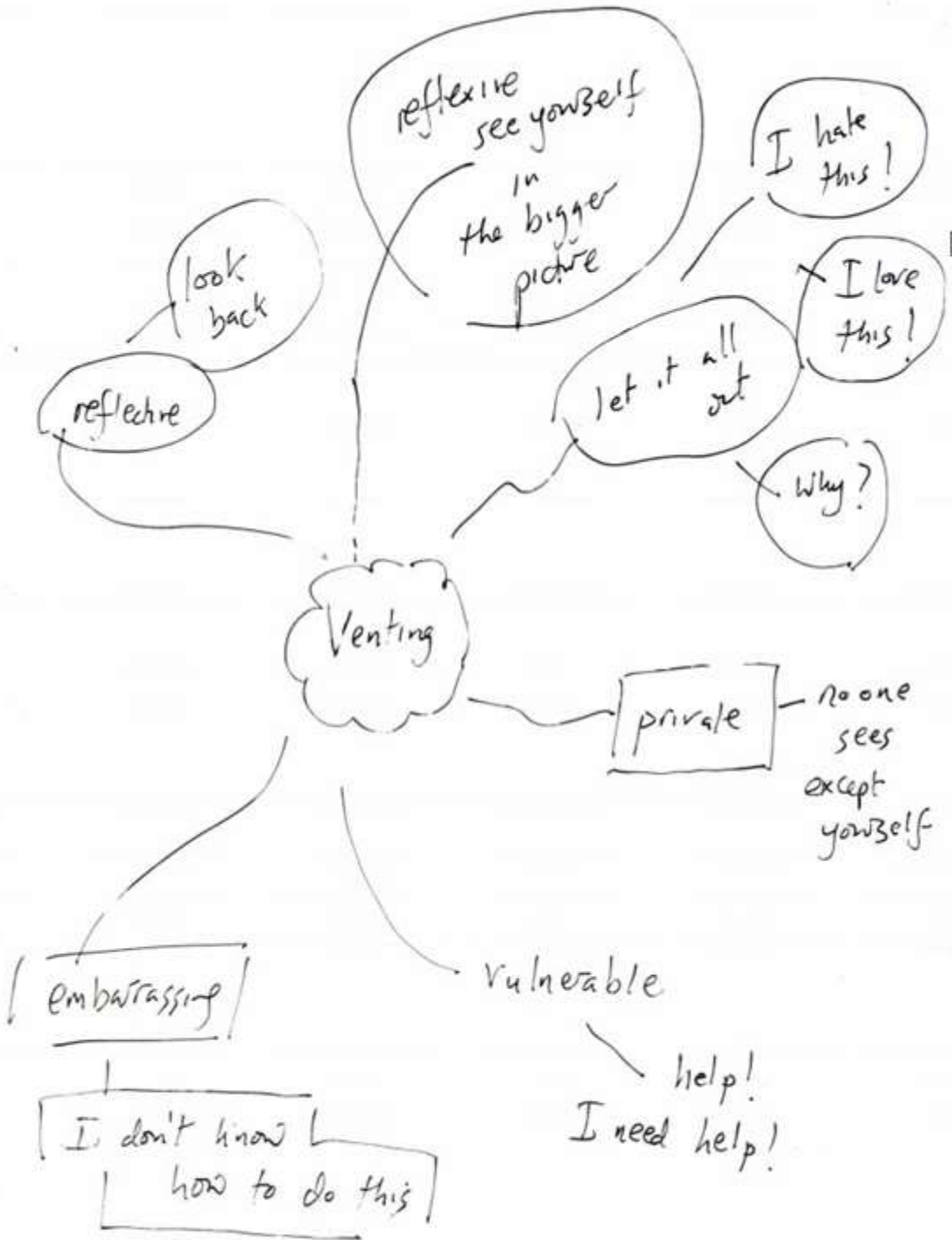
Figure 2 Francis Gilbert's venting

Peggy Riley's Venting

VENT: Venting feels good. I often use simple prompts to get students writing or let them vent with a fast, five-minute first line or question that might help ground them, anchor their thoughts and feelings enough to be able to think – and hopefully learn. More often than not, I use the five minutes while they're writing to do admin: marking attendance on the Excel register or finishing yet another set of PowerPoint slides. The opportunity for me to vent feels great – even if my handwriting is indecipherable to any but me - and maybe that's for the best. After all, these vents are personal and private. We might share "that" we vent, while not sharing "what" we vent about.

 As our world and university open up again, I'm going to remember to vent when I ask my students to. As they say – better out than in.
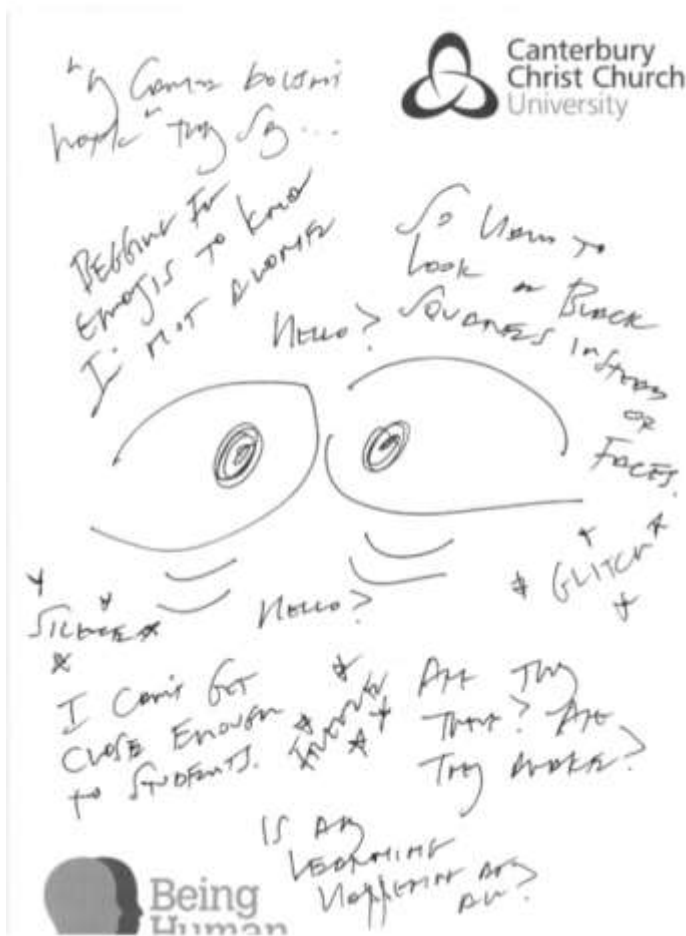

Figure 3 Peggy Riley's venting

Moving on from venting: the circumplex

Francis Gilbert's Circumplex

For me, a second next step which follows on from venting – 'splurging all one's emotions' – is to put my feelings into a circumplex. In a circumplex (Tseng et al. 2019), people's moods are plotted against four axes. Vertically, their energy levels are quantified in terms of low and high arousal, horizontally, their feelings are measured in terms of positive and negative feelings. You will best gain an idea about how it works by looking at the example below:
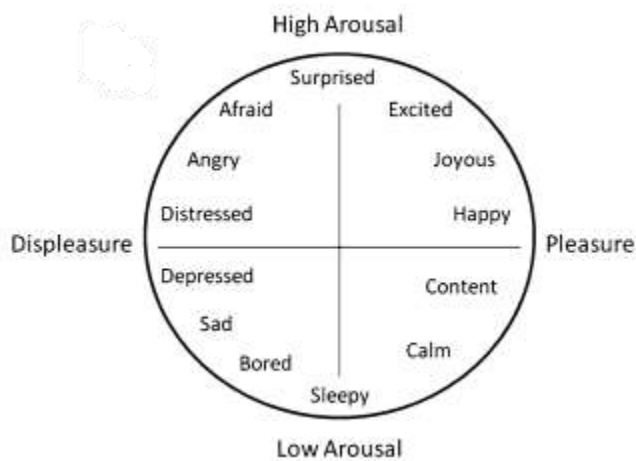

Figure 4 Screengrab from academic article (Tseng et al. 2014)

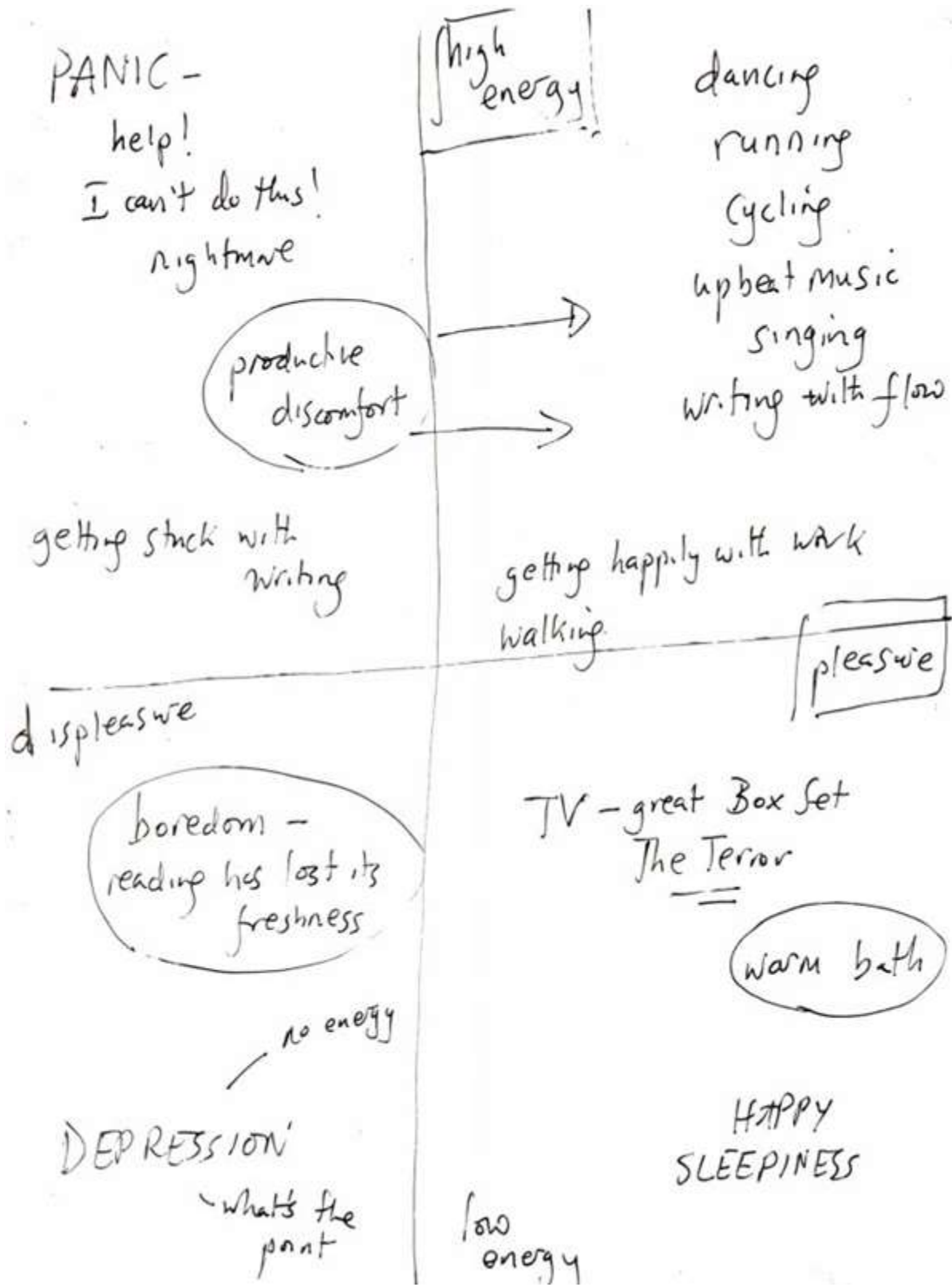In Figure 5, you can see how I devised my own circumplex about online learning and living during lockdown.

Figure 5 Francis Gilbert's circumplex

A key thing that the circumplex (Figure 5) shows me is that my emotions were constantly changing throughout the day throughout lockdown. You can see here how important exercise and playfulness was to keep me upbeat: running, singing, upbeat music and cycling. You can also perceive that much of my day involved what could be called 'productive discomfort': not exactly pleasure or deep anxiety, but that nagging feeling that I should get on with things. For example, before writing this article I felt it, but when I got down to writing, I felt the writing 'flow', and enjoyed it.

Peggy Riley's thoughts on circumplexes

The circumplex of affect is a nifty tool for labelling emotions. Like saying Rumpelstiltskin, we can better understand something if we know its name and call it out. At any moment, we're cycling through a range of feelings, from the hopeful joy of a good session to the distress when the turnout is poor or the engagement low, as well as the low level hum of anxiety for all the things we can't control. Sometimes it's us – the concepts are too difficult or the workload has been too heavy – but sometimes it's simply where we are in the semester – or the pandemic – that's to blame. Being able to pinpoint my own shifting emotions through a session or a module reminds me that I'm only human and doing my best. I often tell the students that I know they're doing the best they can with what they have, whether that's digital access or headspace. Do I remember to tell myself?
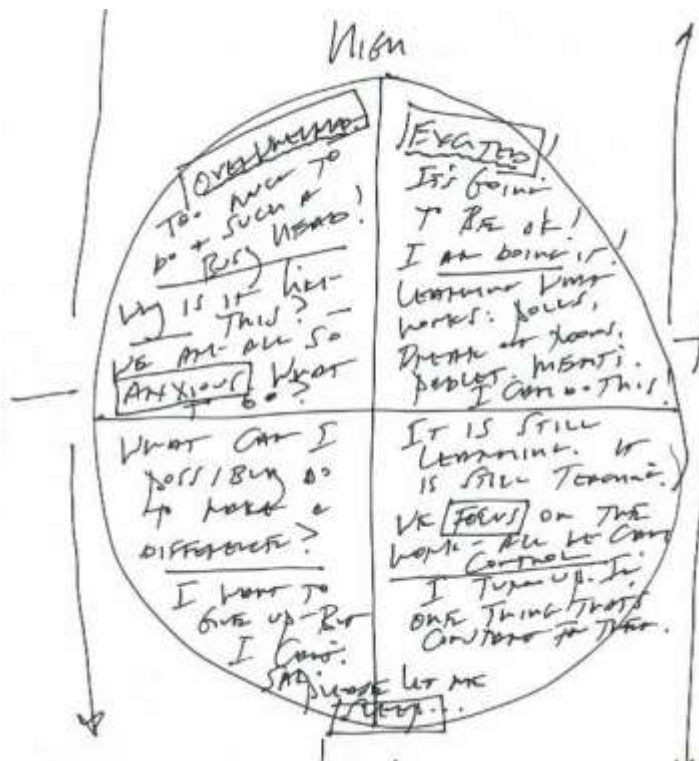

Figure 6 Peggy Riley's circumplex

Circumplex? By Gráinne Daly

Although venting helped a great deal in achieving greater student engagement, there were regular occasions when I craved analogue teaching and the person-to-person contact it involves. I found that using the Circumplex model (Figure 7) helped manage and process feelings during waves of uncertainty. Teaching on Zoom feels performative: we are appearing on a screen, our homes are on show, we are trying to engage with tiles on a screen and expect a human response. It is not normal by any standards and yet we appraise our performance by the only standards we know: those of the classroom. Are we being understood? Do people look interested? Do they look like they are enjoying the material? A whole swathe of questions run in my mind as I look at my Macbook and pretend it's a classroom. Are those with their screens off even there at all? Does poor attendance by some mean they don't like the classes, or the format, or both? Again, it points to a sense of being 'on display', 'on stage', performing. This reel of questions is not as active, if active at all, in a bricks and mortar classroom where there is real and immediate human contact. I found circumplexing to be an enlightening activity through which to manage my pandemic-pedagogy stress. It is a process that calls for brutal honesty, and very often a point or two emerges on the paper that gives insight into a possible path to progress. It illuminated a number of areas for me that I had not been consciously aware of but were fundamental to a positive shift in my management of my teaching and learning process.
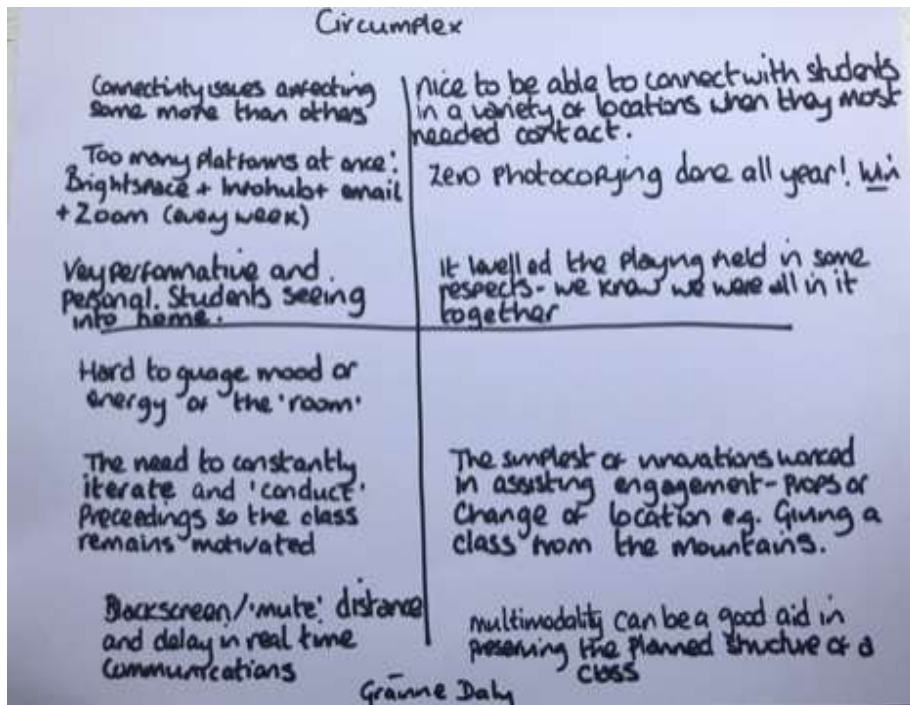
Circumplex

Connectivity issues affecting some more than others | nice to be able to connect with students in a variety of locations when they most needed contact.

Too many platforms at once: Brightspace + Intohub + email + Zoom (every week) | Zero photocopying done all year! Win

Very performative and personal. Students seeing into home. | It levelled the playing field in some respects - we knew we were all in it together

Hard to guage mood or energy of the 'room'

The need to constantly iterate and 'conduct' Proceedings so the class remains motivated | The simplest of innovations worked in assisting engagement - props or change of location eg. Giving a class from the mountains.

Blackscreen/'mute' distance and delay in real time communications | multimodality can be a good aid in preserving the planned structure of a class

Gráinne Daly

Figure 7 Gráinne Daly's circumplex

The Learning Pit

Peggy Riley on the Learning Pit

The Learning Pit hit home for me due to its familiar shape. In most modules, I seem to be drawing the narrative arc on some device or surface. The Learning Pit takes the shape of "the man in a hole" story, beloved by Kurt Vonnegut (2012). Narrative arcs remind us that everything is changing - all the time - and that we are our own protagonists. The shape reminds me that however low I seem to be sinking in my own digital learning, at some point something will shift, and I will be able to climb my way back out.

No one knows how things will change or what we'll keep as regular practice from these strange times, but I'm going to remember how it feels to consider how I learn about my teaching and know that the more in touch I am with my emotions and my process, the more I can help students to be too.
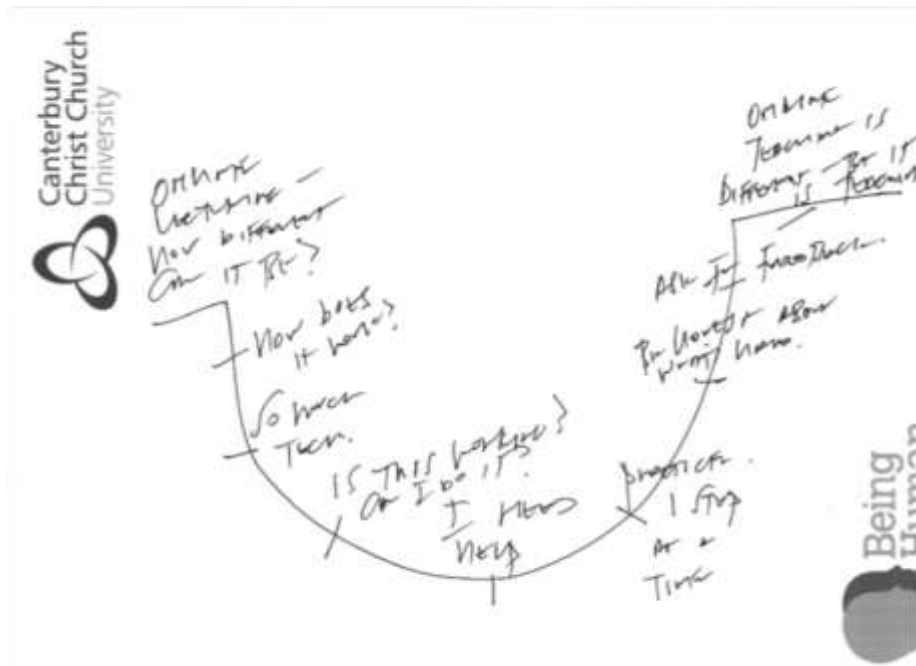
Figure 8 Peggy Riley's learning pit

Gráinne Daly's Learning Pit

When Dr. Francis Gilbert discussed the concept of The Learning Pit at the National Association for Writers in Education Conference (NAWE) in March 2021, I recognized its enormous value as a tool both for students and teachers. It can be employed as a model for working through learning challenges in a mindful way. Interestingly, my 'Learning Pit' diagram (Figure 9), underlined for me something that had been bugging me for some time that I hadn't yet managed to recognize as the key issue it actually was. It relates to the laborious task of having to work across several types of institutional software in order to deliver a teaching module. This is ugly and heavy for students, and is worse for teachers who have to design modules on Brightspace, communicate with students via email or voice notes, operate classes on Zoom and upload class admin details and grades to the university's proprietary software system–Infosys. There are too many systems at play and much duplication of information. If some of these could be divorced and a blend of digital and analogue offered in the future, it would benefit all involved. I overcame the burden of this hyper-tech overload by streamlining my practice to using Zoom for teaching, email for contact with students and voice notes via email for feedback on student work. I relegated Brightspace to being an archive for class notes and for the end of term assignment

submission. The voice note approach worked as it gave a somewhat 'personal' style of feedback to students who commented favourably on the approach. In particular, they were happy to see, from the length of the voice notes, that there had been significant time given over to the reading of their work. With each voice note lasting about twenty minutes, their feedback was that they were happy with so much attention being paid to their work.

Whether we get back into classrooms soon or if the future bodes blended-learning, the innovations I will be bringing forward are the Venting, Circumplex and Learning Pit models. They have been invaluable resources in my teaching practice. They have encouraged empathy when used in classes and have been motivational in enabling people make progress in their own learning pathways. In managing multimodality in a creative writing programme, Barnard states that "creative flexibility is key" (Barnard, 2019:1). She rightly asserts that "it is simply not possible to stay permanently up to date with all relevant technological developments, there will always be something new." (ibid: 29) And there will be further change and further iterations to how we approach teaching and learning. However, the three creative models for reflection that I used have enabled me to rethink my practice and realign it for effect in the systems in which I find myself operating.
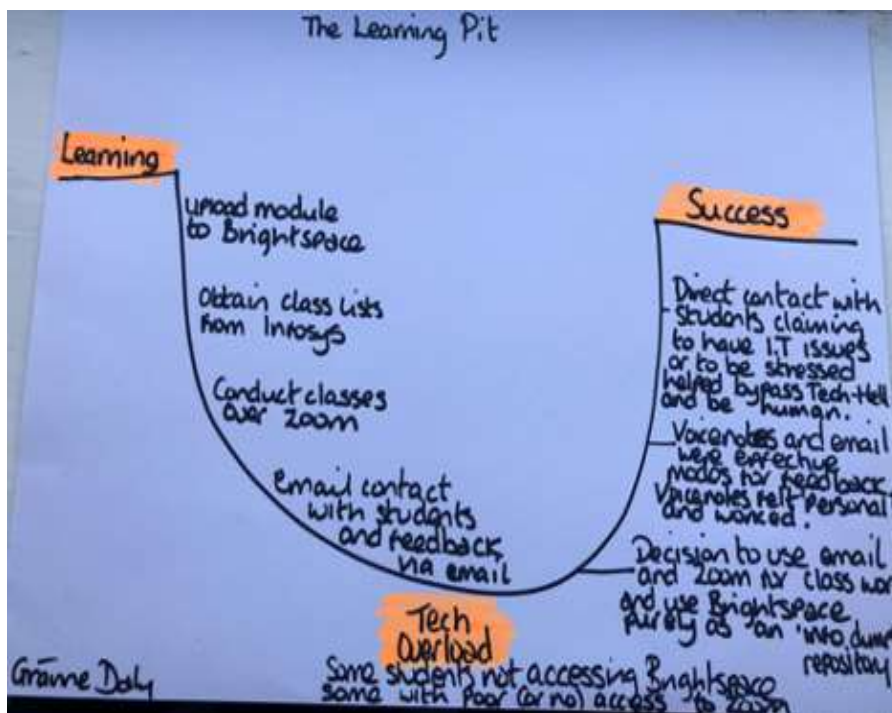

Figure 9 Gráinne Daly's Learning Pit

Francis Gilbert and the Learning Pit

Once I have found that I have understood the different quality of my emotions, I often draw a learning pit to reflect upon what I am learning and where my difficulties are. Figure 10 represents the typical trajectory of me writing an article; I start by thinking I know about a subject and then feel overwhelmed, and then managed to climb out of my problems by taking a step-by-step approach. Drawing this learning pit really made me understand just how important a step-by-step approach is; I always learn something different when I devise a learning pit, but this point particularly struck me this time.

Figure 10 Francis Gilbert's learning pit

Key Findings

These three interconnected strategies of venting, circumplexing and devising learning pits are useful tools for both teachers and students. They are:

Therapy

For teachers, it's important they vent or devise circumplexes or draw learning pits on a private basis, and then consider what is best to share, some material may not be appropriate. The first rule though is for teachers to say to themselves that their venting, circumplexes and learning pits are private in the first instance; this will make the process more therapeutic because it will provide a safe space for expression.

Building empathy

Nevertheless, it is important for students to see some of their teacher's struggles at times. This is not to create sympathy or pity but genuine, authentic understanding. For example, a teacher can make a class understand them better and aid their learning if they vent at appropriate moments, such as sharing their frustration about never seeing anyone on camera. This could build empathy within a class, and offer an opportunity for disclosing important but difficult issues in a low-stakes way.

Metacognition and self-regulation

These strategies are particularly useful with reference to creative writing, they can help teachers and students develop awareness of their writing processes. These strategies aid metacognition; the ability to think about your thinking and learning processes (Busch & Watson 2019).This is in turn helps writers to 'self-regulate'; to set their own time-specific goals (Busch & Watson 2019).

Serious playfulness

These strategies are seriously playful (Bolton and Delderfield 2018: 30); there is something intrinsically 'ludic' about them. They help their creators and readers play the game of life better. The play here is very serious – some of the most painful and important things in life are brought to the fore – but the act of devising them is nearly always fun.

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