

HOW THE UNIVERSITY WORKSHOP HINDERS NEW WRITERS FROM ENGAGING WITH IDEAS (AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT)

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hen Vladimir Nabokov was suggested for a chair in literature at Harvard, Professor Roman Jakobson (qtd. in Grudin 1996: 529-30) famously objected. “What’s next?” he asked. “Shall we appoint elephants to teach zoology?” A similar view was expressed a few years ago at a conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. Asked why no Australian writers had been invited to speak, an organiser quipped, “would you invite the sheep to a wool growers’ conference?” (Adams 1995).

Being a fiction writer and a teacher of writing is a lot like that—we’re the relatives you’d prefer not to invite to the wedding, the awkward school friend you’ve outgrown, the sheep that belong on the farm. University creative writing programs employ us to facilitate writing workshops because, whilst we have doctorates and the gravitas such a qualification confers—as writing practitioners we are also trade. We speak from our experiences—about ideas and inspiration, research, discipline, editing, publishers and agents. We “pass on what we understand about writing,” says Australian writer, Glenda Adams (1995).

Adams should know. An award winning novelist and a former teacher of creative writing at the University of Technology, Sydney, (UTS) and Columbia University and Sarah Lawrence College in the United States, Adams (1995) believes writer/teachers are ideal workshop leaders because we “show how [we] work as writers and how [we] read as writers.” In the university creative writing workshop this connection with the written word gives writer/teachers additional clout when it comes to discussing texts. The most valuable undergraduate classes undertaken when Adams (1995) was a student, she notes, “were those where the lecturers allowed students to see how their minds worked, how they tackled the exploration of their subject and arrived at their idea.”

This practical approach often sits oddly within university writing programs which believe in delivering content rather than facilitating ideas, particularly in the ways in which creative writing teachers locate the philological and theoretical study of other writers’ work within their teaching.

How should the teacher in a university creative writing workshop deal with these tensions, particularly those associated with developing curriculum which both employs writing as a cultural practice with theoretical and critical reading, as well as the reading of narrative just for pleasure. How do we examine what the American academic, Nicole Cooley (2003: 99) of the City University, New York, calls the “troubling exclusions” found in the writing workshop’s dichotomy of creativity and literary studies, many of them, I’ll suggest, requiring a rethinking of the ways in which we approach our selection of texts and the reading of them as a form of creative development.

Teaching Creativity

Creative pedagogies in tertiary writing workshops are predicated on the notion that creativity can be taught or at least nurtured. In writing workshops students embark on their courses with the expectation that they will learn to write by expanding their existing writing skills or through the acquisition of new ones. As the Australian National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (qtd. in Kandelbinder 2005) has noted, the pedagogies developed by writing teachers may include “thinking imaginatively, acting purposefully, generating something original and producing something of value.”

Many supporters of the writing workshop take these skills even further: their workshops become the locus of the 19th century’s romantic notion of writers and writing—a place of divine inspiration, a place in which the discussions and teaching of the class room are transformed into a flowering of creative ideas and these ideas in turn lead to a flash of creativity which manifests itself in a poem or a story.

As David Sill (1996: 300) notes, this process of creative discovery involves an “open irrationality,” and through entering this creative zone, “the mind is fully prepared, discovery is ready to happen, but it happens of its own accord. It cannot be willed.” For Sill as for other creativity theorists, if creativity is to be given full range it needs the opportunity to place all other constraints aside, to think aside from the day to day. “Thinking aside” means allowing the subconscious and the unconscious to work towards solutions that are hidden or blocked by language, habit, and the logic of the conscious mind.

Arthur Koestler, another creative theorist, believed that a freedom to feel—and to create—relies on the suspension of conscious controls. Citing Koestler, Sill (1996: 307) notes that the writer released from the habits and disciplines of thought experiences the freedom necessary for “creative leaps across restricting boundaries.” For Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996: 120) this becomes a “state of involved enchantment that lies between boredom and anxiety.” Most things that are interesting, important and human are the results of creativity. The reason creativity is so fascinating, he asserts, is that when we are involved in it, we feel that we are living more fully than during the rest of our life. The same could be said of the state we enter when an idea engages us or a very good novel seduces us. Ideas form ideas. A narrative is fully experienced. This is what a creative workshop strives to achieve: whether it does so or not depends on a number of factors.

It has been asserted that the fostering of creativity in the classroom requires a balance of freedom and structure (Annarella 1999: 93). Thus, in creative writing workshops students examine

texts—often as extracts in specially produced class “readers”—in order to learn writerly techniques. They do writing exercises, edit and read their work to their peers. Students do all this, in the main, because they want to become writers. Their teachers are there to assist them in this aim and the pedagogies these teachers use are drawn from a century of workshop experience which has its origins in the American composition classes which followed the American Civil War and on which the early US writing programs such as those of University of Iowa were based.

It has been claimed that creative writing programs changed the face of Humanities more radically over the past 30 years than any other development and this shift from English literature studies to creative writing has been hailed as one of the most significant changes in the literary life of our time (Myers 1989: xlvii). Academics such as the University of Technology at Sydney’s Professor Stephen Muecke (2006) believe such a move from a passive appreciation of the canon and writing as commentary to an active production of text needs a new critical vocabulary. Muecke argues that a new version of reading is required, too: *active reading* as well as the pleasurable and distracting kind. This binary, he believes, is not unlike Barthes’ *plaisir/jouissance* divide in which his *texte de plaisir*—those texts read for an easy, contented pleasure are challenged by the *textes de jouissances*—readings which challenge a reader’s experience of the world, offending their held views and taking them into unpredictable and uncomfortable places (Barthes 1973).

It is a balance which writing programs, focused as they are on a forensic reading of texts and on creative production, often struggle to sustain.

Despite the development of creative pedagogies and the view that, with encouragement and writing exercises, students of writing will become writers, critics of writing programs cite this limited practice-focused reading as one of the workshop’s key constraints. They also cite the low success rate of published authors and the inability of students to maintain their creative pursuits beyond the academy as further key failures of such programs. Reviews of some American university writing programs, for example, estimate that as many as 90% of graduates will remain unpublished after graduation (Lim 2003: 164). If limited reading leads to limited “success” what is it that writing workshops offer students other than a three-hour exercise in peer reading and the review of their fellow students’ newly written work?

Just as in most American programs, three-hour writing workshops in my university incorporate the traditional mix of critical/textual analysis, discussion, exercises and writing practice and it is assumed that teaching students in this way will cultivate their creativity, generate ideas, allow them to develop practical writing approaches and experiment with their own work. Our success rate has been encouraging. UTS’s writing program has fostered many of Australia’s most talented younger writers and the post graduate program has seen some of the country’s best known and regarded writers gain Master’s and Doctoral degrees. Our students’ writing ranges in genre and form, much of it focused on what a publisher or literary agent would find acceptable. There is a student-edited anthology of student writing. For more experimental writers self-publishing or performance is an option and a number of students have formed writers’ collectives or have used a university-founded publisher—Local Consumption Press—established in reaction to the conservatism of the trade publishers, to publish more avant-garde work.

But a writing program’s approaches, particularly in the ways in which it presents itself as a broker for new writing, may well be more about marketing than its successful pedagogies, in part because publication is seen as an indicator of the efficacy of a Writing Area’s teaching methods.

Publication is often a student writer's ultimate goal and if a publisher wants a student's work then their writing teachers must be teaching well, mustn't they? Is it wise for a teacher of creative writing to encourage students to write with publication in mind, particularly in such conservative publishing times? What happens to the workshop's exploration of ideas, to experimentation and innovation in this process? Do students fail to fully explore the theories and ideas the texts offer, instead trying too hard to second-guess the tastes of writing teachers who are also judges on literary prizes, consultants to literary agents and publishing houses, forsaking the pursuit of ideas and theory for how-to reading? If so, just how should a university deal with these conflicts of interest in writing workshops?

Jacob Getzels and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1976) are particularly suspicious of this drive for publication, suggesting that the most important part of the creative process may not be the creative product at all, but rather may well be the framing, discovery, or envisioning of the *creative question* and that may well be a question of research anyway, especially for postgraduate students. The idea that creative societies derive some of their creative energy from the emergence of unanswered and unanswerable questions, they believe, reinforces the importance of the creative question to generating creative activity.

These questions of ideas and teaching inform the daily lives of most writing teachers who pride themselves on the publication success of their students. For teachers there is a kind of vicarious publication with every successful student. "I recognised her talent early." "I was right in predicting his success." "She wouldn't have been published without *my* teaching."

Writing teachers have been cautioned about any such assumption of success. Karen Spear (1997: 327), for one, reminds them that "pedagogy... is never innocent." A teacher must recognise that "any approach to teaching writing is embedded in a host of rhetorical and ideological assumptions and that the more recent formulations attempt, more self-consciously than ever before, to foreground those assumptions for students and faculty alike" (Spear 1997: 327). Questions of a writing workshops "success" might be reframed to include the following: would our successful students have become writers regardless of their participation in a creative writing program? Would a traditional English literature degree have offered similar development towards ideas and creative practice? What if the student hadn't studied at all? Plenty of writers have never been near a university. Writing teachers might also ask what ideas their students engaged with or, more pragmatically, what they learned.

Other questions for consideration in this process of pedagogical evaluation might include whether a race for publication is driven by the academy's desire for success or whether a publisher is trawling through the university's new talent because they feel confident that the student has already been vetted, as it were, by an editorial/workshop process. Teachers might also examine the role external parties, such as literary agents and publishers play in influencing a writing area's pedagogical approaches, asking themselves whether acceptability to a conservative publishing industry is something creative writing workshops should be aiming for in their students.

This said, a resistance to industry players can become a kind of cat and mouse game in a writing teacher's selection of course readings. A creative writing workshop, after all, should be a space in which students experiment and innovate, read widely, debate and discuss their ideas, unconcerned by the expectations of a potential market for their work and free of market pressures.

Grading

Grading such experiences brings its own problems. In university writing programs in which writing subjects may form a part of a wider degree, creative work is often compared to other disciplines and evaluated, by necessity, into the pass/credit/distinction and high distinction grades which reflect, not only the quality of the work and the rigour of the process that led to its production, but the prevailing expectations of the academy, and, by association, the publishing industry. Within the parameters of such expectation just how does a teacher of creative writing set and assess student work to encourage and reward the full flow of creative ideas and experimentation? Is this process in itself flawed—leading students to second-guess their teachers' approaches to creative production and their artistic preferences? A teacher/writer's own work is often read with the view to determining their style and copied to gain extra favour. Norman Jackson (2005), for one, found that many teachers believe that assessment inhibits creativity because it depends on predicting the outcomes that will be valued, while Paul Ramsden (2003) argues high quality student learning requires a sense of student control over the learning. Teachers' perceptions of creativity may be too biased or limited to their own values to permit reliable assessment (Kandelbinder 2006).

The teaching of creative writing need not differ from that of music or painting in which mimetic learning forms a more integrated feature of the learning experience. Words are everyday things. Writers require different technical skills from those of a musician, architect, filmmaker or painter needs to develop and practise their art. Writers' tools are words and words can mean many different things. Words lose their meaning if placed in an unexpected order, and, if overly structural approaches are applied to them, such as the prevailing rules of grammar and punctuation, syntax and argument, the student's creativity and their resulting work can be constrained and lifeless. So how should a teacher assess the words of a student who prefers to abandon these rules, whose text may be highly imaginative and innovative but unintelligible?

Any single instrument can't capture the assessment of creativity. Rather, it needs complex, composite instruments that evaluate the product, person, process and situation (Rhodes 1987). Perhaps this explains why so many writing students stop writing once they leave the academy. They're too focussed on writing for publication, for agents and publishers rather than for themselves. Their ideas are unformed. They haven't engaged with theory or literary and cultural developments and their writing teachers, with their own understanding of the literary market, inadvertently or deliberately have imposed too much of the market's aesthetic on them.

Arguments of theory versus practice

When I completed my undergraduate Arts degree, (English Literature, French, Italian and German literature and languages) any desire to be a writer was deferred as I studied other writers. The reading I undertook did more than just introduce me to a world of stories, it also allowed me to see that when I did write my own work I'd participate, in however modest a way, in that literary narrative. I can't imagine I'd have become a novelist without that background reading, but perhaps I would. Since my student days I've engaged in numerous discussions with other writer/teachers about the importance of reading. Some believe reading widely is absolutely necessary to a student writer's development. Others are not so sure. The American writer and academic, Joyce Kornblatt (1996), for one, observes that most writing teachers experience the very good student writer who never reads. The student learns enough about narrative to write so assuredly by absorbing their narratives in numerous other ways: from film, TV, music, conversations and observations and from their narratives of their daily experience.

Given this multi-modality, which texts might best be used in a writing workshop? And just how representative are these choices of the shifting nature of student readings in new media, film and digitised images, music/texts?

Students of literature and text need to learn the discipline of analysis, of engaging with theories and ideas, yet workshop readers made up of short extracts from longer works or easily consumed essays about writing practice have become the pedagogical equivalent of a three-minute sound grab, it could be argued, and as such further exacerbate a failure to engage with longer or more complex texts. Citing Marshall Gregory, Edmund Hansen, and James Stevens, Donna Kain (2003: 105) notes that "society's emphasis on success, instant gratification, the retail/consumer model of education, and paradoxically, student-centered approaches to learning, lead students to look for easy answers and to count on high grades, to avoid difficult work and to develop inflated perceptions of their abilities." This often plays out in students' aversion to theory-laden subjects in which complex ideas challenge writing students and which they therefore actively resist. Hansen and Stephens (qtd. In Kain 2003: 105) also assert that students have "'low tolerances for challenge' and have become 'risk averse' in classrooms because of educational consumerism and an institutional focus on assessment."

For the creative mind to open its unconscious to possibility—the what if, what would I do, how would I feel—of the writer's creative practice and to transmute these questions into felt experiences such as compassion, fear, perplexity, a would-be writer needs to read more than fiction. They need to read widely and critically, a text's social and narrative history needs to be explored, its theories examined. In connecting with ideas, a reader gains experience, which takes them beyond their own world and into that of the characters. They may be reading fiction, but what the engaged reader *feels* isn't and the creative question that develops from these feelings and ideas will actively inform all their creative work.

It's engagements such as this which have led Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (qtd. In Sill 1996: 300) to examine "the unique value and meaning systems of creative people." Value and meaning are highly charged terms. If, as in Csikszentmihalyi's (qtd. Sill 1996: 301) view, every creative act is a search for truth, that the "creative product is never random or arbitrary; it must be true to

something deeply sensed or felt inside the person,” then creative people must be more likely to embrace or exhibit compassion, generosity or empathy.

If this is so, then how do writing workshops even attempt to address these values?

Reading must enter this debate, but which readings of which theories, which cultural contestations, which texts? Which fictional narratives might I choose to inform a developing writer’s creative experiments? Marlowe’s *Faustus* seems just as relevant today as Holden Caulfield or Inspector Rebus, a Duchess of Malfi, Mrs Dalloway, Bridget Jones, but might *Faustus*’ inclusion, for example, be regarded as a revisionary return to the canon? And which theorists should accompany the fiction reader on *Faustus*’ journey?

As noted earlier, writing students often resist theory. “I’m over Walter Benjamin,” one student wrote on his essay. “And I never want to read about the flaneur again.” Writing teachers, unschooled in or averse to the teaching of theory, also may be inclined to agree with Marcel Proust—that incorporating theory in fiction is like leaving the price tag on a beautiful object. Glenda Adams (1996), for one, has cautioned against the notion that writers self-consciously and deliberately write from critical theory. She believes the academy may require a critical analysis of texts but this is often more about the academy’s suspicion “of writers and what they do, citing again that lack-of-intellectual rigour argument. This divide is unfortunate, to say the least, and impedes the development of a lively, productive literary exchange and thought.”

How much should a student be encouraged to incorporate theory into their work if they don’t want to? Given Adams’ anti-theory views, she also believes the theory involved in writing is an accumulating skill where students gather “knowledge through the practice of writing,” a knowledge each writer must discover for themselves. “You cannot be handed the theory and then go off and apply it. As you write you uncover the theory for yourself” (Adams 1996).

But have writing workshops gone too far in resisting theory in their creative pedagogies, and in so doing are their programs in danger of acting more as technical colleges in that they teach the how to write rather than the about writers and writing.

In the study of music or fine art, for example, the history of the development of concepts and the progressive study of changing structures is taught alongside practical executancy and the nurturing of new composition. This is an organic process, a natural development, which leads students from Bach to jazz to shaping their own contemporary musical narratives. When did this rigid separation between theory and creative writing programs occur and why did it occur? Have writing students lost something of their own organic development in these changes?

Critics such as Nicole Cooley and Eve Shelnutt certainly decry these anti-theory shifts. Cooley believes that a “dichotomy opposing ‘literary’ study and ‘creative’ writing creates troubling exclusions” (Cooley 2003: 99). Shelnutt (1989: 9) argues that teachers in these programs have stunted their own and their students’ intellectual development. This, she claims has resulted from writing programs becoming isolated within the discipline of English studies or for English studies to be dropped altogether, by engaging in a workshop method that assumes students already know how to write, and, for that matter to read critically, by placing students in the untenable position of producing publishable work far too soon.

Others, such as UTS’s Stephen Muecke (2006), believe ficto-critical writing may offer an answer, providing a bridge between the two approaches, and an opportunities for students to be creative and theoretical within a given piece. “Ficto-criticism is a mischievous little intellectual

genre, a trickster,” he argues. “It’s a genre which tries to get around other genres – leaping out from behind trees. Not serious on the one hand but still about subjectivity – literature is all about creating communicable forms of subjectivity.” Ficto-critical writing also allows students to examine the architecture of their work as they write, thinking out loud, interrogating ideas, allowing them to enter a dialogue with the creative, responding to it or letting the creative have free rein while the theoretical recedes.

As mentioned earlier, creative writing teachers often offer students texts or text extracts in class readers, which don’t trace literary movements or contextualise the work. These extracts are read greedily—to show students “how to” write rather than as a way of participating in the narrative as the writer intended, from start to finish, where the process of reading allows them to join in an existing and ongoing textual conversation (Cran 2004). The writer’s “tricks” and techniques are absorbed in a forensic examination of style, of how the writer managed to pull it off, rather than an absorbed pleasure in the text.

Identifying as a Writer

There are writing teachers who intentionally challenge the assumptions propounded in creative writing workshops: the belief in individual authorship, the belief that good writing will always get published, and the belief that failure to publish equals failure to write well. Theorists such as Sternberg and Williams (1996) for example, argue that if creative people have to convince others of the value of the often offbeat ideas they generate, if writing workshops offer students anything, they should develop student creativity through a balance of synthetic, analytic and practical abilities. This requires students, many of whom rarely read, and certainly not in a historical, theoretical or cultural context, to be actively challenged. Students need to be asked why they actively identify themselves as “writers” and what that really means to them.

Nicole Cooley (2003: 101) has found the adoption of the writer epithet varies from student to student, often depending on their socio-economic or educational backgrounds. “They would come into my office and announce that they were writers before our classes had even started. Many had adopted the identity of ‘writer’ at their mainly private high schools, or at home, encouraged by teachers and parents. They took creative writing in college to confirm this identity, not to search for it.”

This hasn’t been my experience. As the co-coordinator of my university’s first year undergraduate writing workshops I always ask new students why they enrolled and what they hoped to gain from their studies. Few admit to wanting to be writers. Are they just being modest when they say they enrolled to improve their grammar or to learn to be more focused in their writing practice or that they thought it would help in their writing skills for other subjects? Is there an innate reserve in all of them that masks a secret life of passionate reading and notebook scribbling?

And what does all this say about the nature of creativity and its teachability, anyway? Is creativity a subjective idea, a desired state in which the creator participates in a process, which sets them apart from the “non-creative” community? The lure of creativity in the academy certainly

offers some of this. Students in writing, film, design, wear their creative status proudly. These are highly sought-after courses with waiting lists. In my home state, New South Wales, enrolment in these creative courses requires a high University Admission Index (UAI) score and only the brightest school leavers can enter.

Are the students who attend writing programs, despite their initial shyness about calling themselves writers, drawn by something more than the production of work? Is it the enticement of the creative and, by implication, a readership for their work, for example, in workshops, which offer them a chance to explore their creative potential, to interact and give voice to creative ideas (Grimes: 1999)? And could the emphasis on creative outcomes such as publication or performance and a nervous anticipation of their teacher's assessment undermine a lifelong creative development, which may need to remain unshaped by or to defy structured learning? Would they not be better off with a thirst for new ideas?

Postgraduate students are a different matter altogether. Most of them are focused on completing a writing project—a novel, play, a collection of short stories or poems. These students also face the added expectation of an exegesis which involves them writing about their own work, contextualising it within cultural, theoretical and literary movements. Postgraduate students who may have an extensive record of studying creative writing or publishing their own work but with few credentials in theoretical explorations often find this very hard to do.

Two discourses dominate the postgraduate students' exegetical practice—literary theory and cultural studies. Interestingly, many of these post graduate students face real challenges with their critical writing at this point, finding the dissertation far more difficult to craft than the creative work on which it is based. Exegetical writing is important, so it is concerning that writers can enter postgraduate writing programs without previously doing any such work. Does their anxiety about theory or their inability to develop ideas exegetically highlight a writing program's failure to address the writer's critical reading, especially in the formative undergraduate years or at the postgraduate entry points?

Nike Bourke and Philip Nielsen (2003) have attempted to answer these questions by arguing that the coupling of literary theory and/or cultural studies with creative practice is "largely based on the view that 'good readers make good writers,' the two disciplines contributing to the development of student/writers who are effective readers of both their own and others" work. But creative writer *and* theorist can sometimes be an uncomfortable fit for a writer as many postgraduate supervisors have discovered, and the pedagogies required to support theoretical reading within workshops based on creative practice have led some academics to the view that the research and exploration of ideas within the creative work are enough of a demonstration of a writer's ability to read, analyse, theorise and translate their ideas into words without a burdensome exegesis. Lingering in all these debates, it seems, is the romantic 19th century notion of writers and writing—that writers live to write and their practices should remain above theoretical scrutiny. Writing teachers themselves often foster such views, contributing to the existing tensions between theorists and practitioners in the academy—the elephants and zoo-keepers, the sheep and the woolgrowers.

I would suggest in conclusion that issues such as these require a greater academic engagement, particularly in the ways in which creative writing programs locate themselves within their academic areas and their pedagogical approaches. A return to critical reading, to examining

cultural as well as narrative theory within creative writing practice needs to be readdressed, especially in the ways in which writing curriculum is formed around primary texts. In posing many more questions than I've answered, I've attempted to extend the debate about the teaching of writing in workshops as an evolving rhetoric. This should be an ongoing argument, I would suggest—one in which practice, literary and cultural studies as well as critical analysis, theoretical exploration and reading inform a student's developing creativity.

As writers and writing teachers we need to find new ways of reading too—something which carries us beyond arguments about canonicity, new criticism or theory versus practice. Something which defines—if “defines” is the right word for it—a new way of reading and creating all manner of texts.

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