

# Theories of Creativity and Creative Writing Pedagogy

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Creative writing as a distinct academic field – one with dedicated courses and programmes, with professors whose scholarship is entirely or primarily original creative work, and with professional journals and books devoted to reflections upon the field – is relatively new but has been rapidly expanding in the US, the UK, and elsewhere. As such, we are just beginning to amass articulated theories about the creative process and how we might best teach creative writing as an academic discipline. Joseph Moxley (1989), Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom (1994), and D. G. Meyers (1996) documented the emergence of creative writing as an academic pursuit in the US. To grasp the current state of the field, it is important to consider its overall and recent history, the dominant approaches to creativity and to creative writing pedagogy, and the application of theories and approaches to classrooms.

## **The history of creative writing as an academic pursuit**

Today, in virtually every college and university across the US, students busily workshop, as we say, each other's poems and short stories. These students roam the hallways with stacks of copied poems, stories, and essays or with files looming on their laptops or devices. They enter their creative writing classrooms, pull out or up their marginal notes, and prepare to discuss and offer formative criticism of each other's work. Creative writing is now an established part of the curriculum in higher education, and most English departments have a poet, fiction writer, creative nonfiction writer, or playwright on their rosters. According to Gradschools.com, a comprehensive site on graduate programmes worldwide, the UK, Australia, Ireland, and Canada all have universities offering university and graduate programmes leading to degrees with an emphasis in creative writing. Korea, Mexico, Spain, Norway, and the Philippines also support such programmes. Even high school students in both the US and the UK are often offered the opportunity for creative writing as part of their English studies.

Yet the inclusion of creative writing in academe in the US is a relatively recent phenomenon. As late as 1965, few four-year colleges had resident writers, much less an emphasis in creative writing. While it had become more common for writers to accept university teaching positions, most writers supported their early efforts as they always had: as cabdrivers and carpenters, as postmasters (William Faulkner), journalists (Willa Cather), librarians

(Marianne Moore), insurance executives (Wallace Stevens), and doctors (William Carlos Williams). Visual artists and composers had long before found a home in academe, but writers were still viewed with suspicion. Writing was a craft that one was supposed to pick up by osmosis through a study of literature. If a young writer wanted a mentor, he or she could move to either coast or, better yet, to Paris, buy a cigarette holder and beret, hang out in the coffeeshouses and bars, and hope for the best.

The University of Iowa changed the literary landscape in the US. During the 1920s, along the banks of the Iowa River where the summer heat and humidity create a natural greenhouse for the surrounding agricultural fields of corn and beans, the fine arts flourished. When F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda were dancing and drinking their way through Europe, when Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas were entertaining Pablo Picasso and Ernest Hemingway with marijuana-laced brownies in Paris, when Ezra Pound was immersing himself in the study of Japanese and Chinese poetry and Fascist ideology in Italy, the University of Iowa fostered young artists in a state known for its conservative, rural values.

Painting, sculpture, theatre, dance, and imaginative writing prospered in Iowa City during the roaring twenties. Then, just as a decade of severe economic depression hit the world, Iowa's creative writing programme began to gain in status and prestige. In 1931, Mary Hoover Roberts's collection of poetry, *Paisley Shawl*, was the first creative writing master's thesis approved by the university. Other theses soon followed by such writers as Wallace Stegner and Paul Engle. Engle's thesis, *Worn Earth*, the 1932 winner of the Yale Younger Poets Award, became the first poetry thesis at the University of Iowa to be published (Wilbers 1980: 39). Norman Foerster, director of the School of Letters, pushed forward with the creative writing programme throughout the 1930s. But when Engle joined the faculty in 1937, he jump-started the Iowa Writers Workshop and became its official director in 1943. He laid the foundation for an institution that would make its mark on the worldwide writing community.

Engle, a hard-driving, egocentric genius, possessed the early vision of both the Writers Workshop and the International Writing Program. He foresaw first-rate programmes where young writers could come to receive criticism of their work. A native Iowan who had studied in England on a Rhodes Scholarship and travelled widely throughout Europe, Engle was dissatisfied with merely a regional approach. He defined his ambition in a 1963 letter to his university president as a desire 'to run the future of American literature, and a great deal of European and Asian, through Iowa City' (Wilbers 1980: 85–6).

During his twenty-four years as director, Engle took a group of fewer than a dozen students and transformed it into a high-profile programme of 250 graduate students at its peak in 1965 (Wilbers 1980: 83). More importantly, he made decisions about creative writing that still define the academic field. For instance, he divided the Workshop into genres – poetry and fiction – to make classes easier to teach, took a personal interest in each student, and functioned as both mentor and godfather. In an essay entitled 'A Miranda's World' in Robert Dana's *A Community of Writers: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writers' Workshop* (1999), Donald Justice describes how Engle picked his wife and himself up from the Iowa City bus station on a cold January day, found them an apartment, and then gave the young poet one of his own wool suits to see him through the bitter winter.

Throughout the years, Engle brought to campus the hottest literary names of the time including Dylan Thomas, W. H. Auden, and Robert Frost. Engle then went on to found the International Writing Program where he poured this same kind of energy into spreading his literary enthusiasm around the globe. Engle's model of rigorous, genre-based workshops,

close-knit communities formed around mentors, and highly respected visiting writers became the standard in the field.

The Iowa Writers Workshop MFA graduates fanned out across the US, and many entered the ranks of academe. English departments, experiencing dwindling numbers of majors, began to open up their doors to creative writers whose classes quickly filled. The black berets and cigarette holders of a previous era were traded in for the tweed jackets and pipes of faculty life. The turbulent late 1960s and early 1970s saw a growth spurt for creative writers in academe, as students not only demanded the end of the Vietnam War and greater civil rights, but more seemingly relevant course work.

Iowa Workshop graduates, in turn, set up their own writing programmes at other universities and produced their own graduate students, who once again set up more programmes. In the UK, creative writing in academe began to take hold as well. In 1969, the University of Lancaster was the first to offer an MA in creative writing. Even when the US academic job market inevitably tightened, academically trained writers found their way into teaching in community colleges in high schools, in state-run writers-in-the-schools programmes, in the prisons, and in youth shelters, retirement homes, elder hostels, and other short, focused noncredit workshops and conferences.

From the fall of 1996 to 2001, according to Andrea Quarracino's report in the *AWP Job List* (2005), the number of tenure-track academic job openings listed with the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) ranged from forty-six to seventy-two but later jumped to more than 100 twice, in 2002 and 2004. In 2013, AWP listed more than 800 creative writing programmes or concentrations. The literary community at large has grown to the point that it touches almost every city in the States. By 2005 in the UK, creative writing had become the fastest growing and most popular field in higher education, with nearly every college and university offering creative writing courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Beck 2005).

With this growth, 50 PhD programmes in creative writing emerged by 2013. New kinds of MFA programmes surfaced. In 1976, Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont, was one of the first institutions to offer a high-profile but low-residency graduate MFA programme in creative writing. Students and faculty came together for two intense, on-campus weeks twice a year, then conducted their courses through one-on-one correspondence. Students and faculty could then retain their existing jobs while taking part in the programme. There was no need for relocation nor for financial aid in the form of teaching assistantships. Since the early 1970s, low-residency programmes in the US now number more than 50, according to AWP, and exist in the UK as well.

With the turn of the twenty-first century came specialisation within MFA creative writing programmes. In 2004, Seattle Pacific University launched an MFA programme highlighting writing about spirituality. The programme's website describes its mission:

The low-residency MFA at SPU is a creative writing program for apprentice writers – both Christians and those of other traditions – who not only want to pursue excellence in the craft of writing but also place their work within the larger context of the Judeo-Christian tradition of faith.

Both Chatham University and Iowa State University began to offer MFA degrees that focus on particular topics. Chatham's MFA emphasises place-based writing and social justice and allows students to work across genres. Iowa State's creative writing programme has defined its mission this way:

Under the broad rubric of 'environment', our MFA program in Creative Writing and the Environment would offer an original and intensive opportunity for gifted students of nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama to document, meditate on, celebrate, and mourn the reciprocal transformation of humanity and our world/s. (Iowa State University 2005: 2)

By 2013, the University of Alaska Anchorage now had a low residency program with an option of a special emphasis on writing about the relationships between people and place, landscape, nature, science and the arts, no matter where these relationships exist or how they are expressed. And the MFA Program in Utah had a modular approach with emphasis in Environmental Humanities, History of the American West, and Book Arts. Likewise, in the UK, students can now earn MAs, MPhils, and PhDs with an emphasis in creative writing in the traditional categories of poetry, fiction, and playwriting but can also link creative writing with science, critical theory, journalism, or the teaching of creative writing (Beck 2005).

As writing programmes mature and develop, the field is also re-thinking its pedagogy. Until around 1990, most creative writing faculty followed the Engle teaching model without much reflection. A workshop teacher led small groups – *The AWP Directors' Handbook* (2003: 5) recommends no more than fifteen, with twelve as ideal, but recognises that most workshop groups now are between eleven and twenty – through peer oral critiques of completed poems, stories, chapters of novels, or plays. In the Engle model, the criticism was meant to be tough and could save the writer years of individual trial and error. But the criticism could also become personality-driven or downright nasty. Little emphasis was placed on structure, work in process, or revision.

Currently, many workshop faculty across the US and UK have adapted Engle's model, are experimenting with creating new approaches to teaching creative writing, and are distinguishing methods used in graduate courses from those used in undergraduate courses. Some teach from assignments on technique and structure, whereas others initiate a process of constant revision. Some lecture to huge rooms of students on technique, then break into smaller workshops. Others emphasise working exclusively in even smaller groups of four or five students.

Texts such as *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom* articulate current practices and suggest new possibilities, in this case offering

various ways to configure authority: as the expertise of the teacher or of the students, as agency or action for accomplishing things, as a set of mutually beneficial or agreed-upon guidelines for fostering success, as a set of evaluation criteria, as seemingly inherent forces in writing and teaching, and even as authorship itself. (Leahy 2005: i)

In 2004 in the UK, *New Writing: the International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* was launched under the editorship of Graeme Harper. This journal, published by Multilingual Matters, includes peer-reviewed pedagogy articles as well as shorter creative work. *Can It Really Be Taught?: Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy* (Ritter and Vanderslice 2007) is a collection asserting that creative writing has too long been a separatist pedagogy based on undocumented and uncritical lore. The editors and authors examine this lore and argue for reframing the discipline and most importantly its pedagogy in relation to intellect rather than ego. Some of these same faculty members on both continents who have helped to restructure writing workshops have also made an effort to provide their own students with pedagogical training. More recent books about creative

writing pedagogy include *Teaching Creative Writing* (Beck 2012) and *Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?* (Donnelly 2010). In addition, *The Program Era* (McGurl 2011) analyses the effects that the rise of creative writing in the academy has had on literary fiction published in the US. Many MFA programmes, such as those at Cardiff University, Antioch University of Los Angeles, and Indiana University, offer internships, courses, or postgraduate certificates in Teaching Creative Writing.

Writing workshops abroad, too, are now commonplace. A budding writer can go off for a summer to study creative writing in a number of international cities including Dublin, Paris, and Prague. The University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program offers its writers study-abroad workshops in a different location every year; recent destinations have included the Philippines, Greece, and Cuba. In 2005, Iowa State University set up the first international writers-in-the-schools programme – a form of service learning – in Trinidad and Tobago, where Iowa State graduate students taught creative writing in K-12 schools in a Caribbean country with virtually no creative writing curriculum. Now that creative writing has established itself as an academic pursuit, its programmes are expanding, especially as academic options expand more generally.

### Approaches to creativity and pedagogy

The Iowa Writers' Workshop declares on its website: 'Though we agree in part with the popular insistence that writing cannot be taught, we exist and proceed on the assumption that talent can be developed, and we see our possibilities and limitations as a school in that light'. The 'model for contemporary writing programs', by its own accounts, bases itself in part upon the most widely influential theory underpinning creativity and creative writing: the Romantic myth. The premises of this approach to creativity include that talent is inherent and essential, that creative writing is largely or even solely an individual pursuit, and that inspiration not education drives creativity. For the Iowa Writers' Workshop, that means, 'the fact that the Workshop can claim as alumni nationally and internationally prominent poets, novelists, and short story writers is, we believe, more the result of what they brought here than of what they gained from us'. The Romantic myth is a positive influence on creative writing in a variety of ways. This approach values the very act of creation that is difficult for writers themselves to articulate and values the relative isolation that, even in academe, seems necessary to write. In addition, it links writing with concepts of beauty and originality.

To state openly and confidently that creative writing cannot be taught, however, puts the field at risk as a serious *academic* pursuit. If creative writing cannot be taught, then it might also follow that student work cannot be evaluated and programmes cannot be assessed; creative writing does not, then, fit easily into academic contexts.

Brent Royster in 'Inspiration, creativity, and crisis: the Romantic myth of the writer meets the postmodern classroom' (2005) points to many aspects of the Romantic myth as problematic for the field. He demonstrates the dominance of Romantic ideology in popular culture as well as in the field's own venues such as the *AWP Writer's Chronicle* and *Poets & Writers*. Royster turns to the work of Csikszentmihalyi:

Csikszentmihalyi's model, simply put, refutes the idea that solely the individual generates a creative work. On the contrary, though his dynamic model of creativity still illustrates the individual's role in the creative process, equal agency is distributed among the social and cultural systems influencing that individual. (2005: 32)

What feels like inspiration to the isolated writer can be articulated instead as a dynamic set of forces coming together:

Rather than claiming that this inspiration came from somewhere beyond the writer, it seems more apt to suggest that the mind of the artist has reached an opportune moment in which rhythms, sounds, and connotations seem to arise unbidden from memory. (Royster 2005: 34)

This approach allows the writer to define him- or herself as an active participant in a larger, dynamic process. This view of creativity values both individual writer and culture or community and supports the concept of the multi-vocal workshop-based classroom.

The University of Cardiff offers a graduate degree in the 'Teaching and Practice of Creative Writing', according to its website, thereby claiming that creative writing can be taught and that the combination of creativity and pedagogy is an important emerging area: 'With increased interest in the relevance of creativity to current educational practices, this degree will place students advantageously for many types of teaching opportunities'. Programmes like this one and the graduate programme at Antioch University of Los Angeles reconfigure the field to include teaching. As a whole, the tension between the Romantic myth and various responses to it seems productive, allowing for a variety of approaches and debates that recognise the seriousness and rigor of the pursuit and the field's distinct pedagogical theories and practices.

Those who teach writing are very often situated in academe just down the hall from literary scholars, and most writing instructors would agree that good writers read a lot and that understanding written texts offers models, tools, and ideas for one's own writing. Elaine Scarry argues that beauty begets itself, that to read a beautiful sonnet urges one to reproduce that beauty, and that 'this willingness continually to revise one's own location in order to place oneself in the path of beauty is the basic impulse underlying education' (Scarry 1999: 7). Neurologist Alice Flaherty asserts, 'writer's block is not an inevitable response to masterpieces. They can inspire' (2004: 106). Indeed, creative writers can use literature and literary theory to help them understand and respond to the tradition (see Lauri Ramey's chapter, 'Creative Writing and Critical Theory', in this section). Madison Smartt Bell implies that grasping form through reading is foundational for writers: 'The reader who wants to write as well has got to go beyond the intuitive grasp of form to the deliberate construction of form' (1997: 22). In other words, teaching writing depends upon the study of existing texts in order that students comprehend how to construct texts of their own. Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux (1997: 105) offer a similar stance for poets:

Poets need to tune their ears as finely as musicians; that's why reading poems aloud is a good idea . . . You need not be familiar with meter to gain an appreciation for the rhythms of writers' lines, and to begin to work with this principle yourself.

Moreover, Addonizio and Laux put the necessity of studying literature bluntly: 'To write without any awareness of a tradition you are trying to become part of would be self-defeating' (1997: 13). Reading literature and understanding it is part of being a writer.

Our other colleagues down the hall, at least in the US, are compositionists, who have been variously at odds with and in league with creative writers. Composition is often perceived as the department's curricular service to the university and creative writing is often perceived as the frivolous pursuit of eccentrics. Many creative writing teachers in the US today have drawn from graduate-school training in teaching composition and from composition theorists. Wendy Bishop is the lead example of a theorist who straddled the fence between composition and creative writing, who attempted to bring the theories underpin-

ning the two disciplines together, and who brought not only composition approaches to creative writing but also vice versa. One of the important arguments that Bishop (2003: xi) and other compositionists have made to counter the assertion that writing is less rigorous than literary study is that writing courses have content and that writing is 'important work'. Bishop (2003: 234) argues that students 'should approach composition classes and creative writing classes in pretty similar ways. Overall, both types of classrooms need to encourage *and reward* risk taking and experimentation as you learn to conform to and break genre conventions'. Some argue the possibility that composition and creative writing are versions of the same field, while others argue that despite commonalities, discipline distinctions must be respected.

Cognitive science and creative writing share some history, in that both fields made great gains as academic pursuits only in the last half-century. Linguists like George Lakoff have been studying metaphor, cognition, and the arts for decades. Bell (1997), in the first section of *Narrative Design* entitled 'Unconscious mind', discusses the cognitive processes of creative writers, though he does not use terminology or specific theories of cognitive science. Likewise, Addonizio and Laux claim: 'We continually make comparisons and connections, often without realizing that we are doing so, so comfortable are we with seeing in this way' (1997: 94). Flaherty also discusses the cognitive process of creativity, in which we are able to make new, unexpected connections. These comparisons and connections that become images and metaphors in our poems are results of cognition and are of primary concern to Lakoff and others.

Existing theories of cognition underpin current pedagogical practices such as the workshop-based classroom and the battle against cliché as well as how the theories might improve our teaching. John T. Bruer notes:

Instruction based on cognitive theory envisions learning as an active, strategic process . . . It recognizes that learning is guided by the learners' introspective awareness and control of their mental processes. It emphasizes that learning is facilitated by social, collaborative settings that value self-directed student dialogue. (1999: 681)

The workshop-based creative writing classroom – a nontraditional academic approach – presents writing as this sort of active, strategic process: all students must actively engage, student-writers become increasingly aware of how their own and others' decision-making affects written work, and the writing process is situated within an interactive, dynamic classroom where students share informed criticism. We are using a pedagogy that is supported by findings in cognitive science.

Studies show, too, that students' embedded knowledge structures and prevalent misconceptions are resistant to traditional instruction. As Bruer (1999: 682) states: 'The result is that students encode, or learn, schemata that are very different from those which teachers are attempting to impart'. To apply this problem to creative writing, we might consider, for instance, how schemata of narrative are embedded in our students' brains through interaction with television and video games. Or, we might consider students' relative unfamiliarity with poetry, or their deeply embedded schemata of poetry based on nursery rhymes, as an opportunity to build new schemata or build upon existing schemata of language's rhythm.

Cognitive science, too, offers ways to categorise learning and memory. Henry L. Roediger III and Lyn M. Goff offer an overview: '*Procedural memory* refers to the knowledge of how to do things such as walking, talking, riding a bicycle, tying shoelaces. Often the knowledge represented is difficult to verbalize, and the procedures are often acquired slowly and only after much practice' (1999: 250). Procedural memory is a way to understand learning in

creative writing classrooms as slowly accumulated knowledge deeply internalised through practice that emerges as if known all along. Flaherty (2004: 242) offers a similar take: 'on its own the sensation of inspiration is not enough . . . Perhaps the feeling of inspiration is merely a pleasure by which your brain lures you into working harder'. If we think of inspiration as a cognitive event, how can creative writing courses best create the conditions for it and foster the work of writing?

With its workshop model, creative writing is a field with what Lee Shulman has termed, though he used professions like law and medicine as examples, 'signature pedagogies', which are distinct and commonly recognizable

types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated in their new professions. In these signature pedagogies, the novices are instructed in critical aspects of the three fundamental dimensions of professional work – to *think*, to *perform*, and to *act with integrity*. (2005: 52)

We must continue to define, support, and improve upon our signature pedagogy. Ultimately, of course, the burden and the opportunity for both teacher and student is to write.

### Applying theory to practice in creative writing courses

Creative writing has defined itself in opposition to established practices in higher education, and this stance as much as any theory has contributed to classroom practices. This stance has also resulted in an approach to teaching markedly different from other disciplines: no lectures, no exams, decentralised authority, and student ownership of the learning process. Before composition theory touted the importance of audience and process, creative writing professors recognised that writers benefit from an immediate and worthy audience for their emerging work. The workshop, therefore, attempts to create a sort of literary café in which students earnestly analyse a classmate's poem or story, pointing out how it succeeds and what the writer might do to improve it and offering perspective that enables the writer to re-envision and revise, often for a portfolio of polished work.

Although different professors and tutor-writers implement the workshop – the signature pedagogy – differently, common practices exist, and the advent of online teaching has not altered that pedagogy significantly. Most often, before coming to class, students post each other's works to the course website or provide print copies of their works to classmates, who prepare for the upcoming class by reading and annotating the works with thoughtful, formative criticism. During class, the instructor leads discussion of the student works by asking questions, keeps the comments grounded in relevant and meaningful criteria, and maintains civility and respect among all students. Along with students, professors offer suggestions for improving not just the piece under discussion but also the approach to and understanding of craft and of the creative process. To minimise attempts to justify the work under discussion and to maximise introspection, the writer remains silent while the class discusses his or her draft. Professors also work individually with students during conferences, lecture on specific techniques, and assign practice writing exercises. By reserving official, final, or summative evaluation – the grade – of the creative work for the end of the academic term, the workshop approach privileges process over product and emphasises the complexity and time-consuming nature of the creative arts.

While student works comprise the major texts for the course, many professors assign reading from literature anthologies as well but approach and discuss these texts with a writerly slant. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jane Smiley (1999: 250) maintains that, for



writers, the study of literature provides distance from the ego and allows students to see the connections their work has to other literature. In *On Becoming a Novelist*, John Gardner notes that the writer 'reads other writers to see how they do it (how they avoid overt manipulation)' (1983: 45–6). He advises writers to read to see how effects are achieved, to question whether they would have approached the situation in the same way and to consider whether their way 'would have been better or worse, and why'. Similarly, R. V. Cassill, in *Writing Fiction*, explains that 'what the writer wants to note . . . is how the story, its language and all its parts have been joined together' (1975: 6). Great literature, therefore, models technique for writers.

As the popularity of creative writing classes has increased, more textbooks focusing on technique have emerged for use alongside student work and published literature. The *AWP Hallmarks of an Effective BFA Program or BA Major in Creative Writing* suggests that undergraduate creative writing courses 'require craft texts and literary works (anthologies, books by individual authors, literary periodicals) that offer appropriate models for student writing'. Most creative writing textbooks present chapters discussing specific elements of various genres and offer exercises to help students master these techniques. While textbooks acknowledge the difficulty of articulating foolproof guidelines, the authors assume would-be writers benefit from instruction on craft. In her introduction to *Write Away: One Novelist's Approach to Fiction and the Writing Life*, for example, Elizabeth George explains that for those who teach creative writing, 'craft is the point'; it is 'the soil in which a budding writer can plant the seed of her idea in order to nurture it into a story' (2005: x). Similarly, Addonizio and Laux state that 'Craft provides the tools: knowing how to make a successful metaphor, when to break a line, how to revise and rewriting – these are some of the techniques the aspiring poet must master' (1997: 11). Heather Sellers, in *The Practice of Creative Writing*, tells students that creative writing is 'about crafting language – words on a page – so that a reader (a stranger!) will have a specific kind of emotional experience. Design is the key word' (2013:4).

Unlike texts for other disciplines, creative writing texts seldom provide instructor's editions or supplements that ground the instructions and exercises in theories about learning to write, in part because even the teacher is yet another writer in the classroom. The hallmarks for successful undergraduate and graduate creative writing programmes in *The AWP Directors' Handbook* state that creative writing faculty consist of 'writers whose work has been published by nationally known, professional journals and presses respected by other writers, editors, and publishers' (2003: 15). These hallmarks stipulate, 'the criteria for promotion, assignment of classes, and tenure of creative writing faculty focus on publication of creative work, demonstrated ability as teachers of creative writing, and contributions to the university and greater literary community' (2003: 15). In other words, the leading organisation that promotes creative writing as a discipline values writers who teach more than teachers who write, as do other practice-based professions like medicine and graphic design.

More so than other disciplines, however, creative writing must contend with questions of validity and scholarship. While the blogosphere may allow such criticism to proliferate, the questions have lingered for decades. Flannery O'Connor's now famous remark that universities 'don't stifle enough' writers still holds sway, and pejorative labels such as *workshop story* or *McPoem*, a term coined by Donald Hall, reflect the disdain many feel for the writing that emerges from creative writing programmes. Even some who teach creative writing question its existence as an academic subject. For example, Lynn Freed in her memoir 'Doing time' (2005) confesses that she does not know 'how to pretend to unravel the mystery' (68) of what makes a good story and admits that she sometimes feels as if, by attempting to teach creative writing, she is participating in 'a sham' (72). Most professors

of creative writing do not share Freed's opinion, but they share her despair at the prospect of articulating clearly and accurately what they do. As Richard Cohen states in *Writer's Mind: Crafting Fiction*, 'Technique is what can most efficiently be taught in classrooms, but technique is not the essence of writing' (1995: xvi). George Garrett makes a similar point in 'Going to see the elephant: our duty as storytellers' by claiming that the creative process is magic and mysterious: 'It breaks all the rules as fast as we can make them. Every generalization about it turns out to be at best incomplete or inadequate' (1999: 2).

Nonetheless, creative writing professors do and must make generalisations. 'If the teacher has no basic standards', Gardner writes, 'his class is likely to develop none, and their comments can only be matters of preference or opinion. Writers will have nothing to strive toward or resist, nothing solid to judge by' (1983: 84). Bishop and Ostrom's challenge to 'reexamine what takes place in creative-writing classrooms' (1994: xxii) has resulted not in a uniformity of standards and common learning objectives but in a meaningful dialogue by which professors can make clear what they expect students to learn. The AWP annual conference, for example, features dozens of panels on pedagogy and its website provides a wealth of pedagogical tools. Books such as *What If?* (1990), *The Practice of Poetry* (1992), *The Portable MFA in Creative Writing* (2006) and *Naming the World* (2008) compile exercises and advice from published authors with extensive classroom experiences. Julie Checkoway, former President of the AWP Board of Directors, writes that the successful writers and teachers who contributed to *Creating Fiction* 'have staked their reputations on the notions that when it comes to writing, teaching is at least as important as talent, nurture at least as important as nature' (1999: ix).

How best to teach and nurture writers changes as the population of students and the venues for creative writing classes change, and that comes across in responses to much of the criticism in the blogosphere and also comes across in recent pedagogy scholarship. Like professors in other disciplines, creative writing professors have responded to the influx of students whose different assumptions, expectations, and life experiences necessitate a change in pedagogy. Mark L. Taylor, in 'Generation NeXt: today's postmodern student – meeting, teaching, and serving' points to research suggesting: 'In our postmodern culture, the traditional models of premodern religion and modern science/reason must compete with postmodern consumerism/entertainment and hedonism/immediate needs gratification on a playing field that is level at best' (2005: 104). Current undergraduates, he contends, tend to be accepting of 'everything except people who believe in the hegemony of their chosen model'. Recognising that a student does not enter the classroom a *tabula rasa* and that the aesthetic values inherent in great works of literature may appear arbitrary, exclusive, or contrary to publishing trends or to students' embedded cognitive schemata, creative writing professors have developed strategies for identifying assumptions about literature and reconciling these with other notions of how a text communicates. In his essay, 'On not being nice: sentimentality and the creative writing class', for example, Arthur Saltzman (2003: 324) laments the sentimentality that students bring to the classroom – their tendency 'to be passionate according to formula' – and he strives to 'expose the evaluative criteria that they invariably bring to the discussion' of poetry. Discussing both his and his students' assumptions about poetry allows Saltzman to help students develop 'more specific and involved responses' with the hope that they 'become more demanding of the poems they encounter and produce' (2003: 325).

Being explicit about evaluative standards is in the interest of students, but articulating learning objectives also helps legitimise the difficult work students and teachers do in creative writing classrooms. Although institutional assessments may have limited value in determining whether students will be successful writers, six regional accrediting bodies

in the US require institutions to develop, articulate, and assess standards and to improve student learning. The UK has the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education as its regulating body, which requires module-by-module assessment and external examiners to an even greater extent than is required in the US. More importantly, creative writing professors and tutor-writers have taken ownership of the ways in which creative writing is evaluated. In a creative writing class, marks or grades reflect comprehension and application of specific writing strategies as well as prolific writing. Many professors provide numerous and varied opportunities to demonstrate competency, including exercises, analyses of published work, and even quizzes or exams along with the portfolio of creative work.

As creative writing continues to define itself as a rigorous, academic discipline, professors will need to take into account the technological and demographic changes taking place. Online courses and programmes as well as online magazines, hypertexts, and blogs offer the prospect of reaching specific audiences and challenging assumptions about what constitutes publication. Cathy Day, for instance, is a creative writing professor and blogger who is redesigning her workshops for the twenty-first century and writing about it as she goes. How are professors addressing these new venues and texts? What teaching strategies have they developed to accommodate diverse groups of distance learners and to maintain the high standards for which college-level courses in creative writing are known? How successfully is the workshop environment being translated to the Internet? What are the standards by which different texts are judged?

At the same time, changes in the publishing industry limit some opportunities for novice writers while opening up other possibilities. Despite the number of writing courses and programmes, according to the National Endowment for the Arts' *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (2004), the percentage of book readers at all ages has declined significantly over the past two decades. A follow-up study in 2007 revealed that 'teens and young adults read less often and for shorter amounts of time compared with other age groups and with Americans of previous years'. At the same time, more people are choosing to read e-books, to order books online, or download books illegally for free, the result being that many smaller presses and local bookstores have vanished. One of the few increases in literary activity has been in creative writing. These trends raise questions regarding who reads the works produced by writers from now more numerous creative writing programmes. Many authors turn to other avenues to find readers for their works, choosing, for example, to self-publish, publish online, or use software to produce downloadable novels and story and poetry collections. Whether publishing online or in print, writers more and more are responsible for promoting their works. Such changes offer the field opportunities to continue to refine and expand curricula, to explore the theoretical foundations on which the curricula are based, and to contribute to literary excellence within and outside of the academy.

## Conclusion

Creative writing is an academic pursuit with a documented history that shapes its current theories and practices. The field has become increasingly varied in its curricula, moving away from foundations of literary scholarship to the signature pedagogy based on the workshop model and, more recently, to manifestations in low-residency, service-learning, and web-based iterations so that creative writers in academe – both professors and students – not only develop talent and craft but also bear witness to contemporary culture and develop transferable cognitive and communicative skills. Creative writing has borrowed

and reshaped theoretical approaches from literary criticism, composition studies, linguistics, and even cognitive science. These foundations underpin a rigorous, rewarding academic experience in creative writing classrooms in the US, the UK, and increasingly around the globe. Though Dorothea Brande found the way creative writing was taught to be problematic seventy years ago, her claim in *Becoming a Writer* about our endeavour holds true today: ‘there is no field where one who is in earnest about learning to do good work can make such enormous strides in so short a time’ (1934: 27). Though challenges in the field still exist – perhaps *because* they exist – creative writing has come into its own within academe over the last four decades.

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