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Teaching Creative Writing: the role of the tutor
Author: Angela France

The growing popularity of Creative writing courses, at all levels, creates a demand for teachers who are equipped to manage the particular needs of writing students. This article will examine the difference between traditional expectations of tutors as instructors and the role of creative writing tutors as facilitators or 'agents of transformation' (Teleky, 2001). Creative writing students have potential to be particularly vulnerable and insecure and those needs drive the development of the tutors' skills to include active listening, acute observation, and understanding of human behaviour and motivation. There are facets of the tutor's role other than that of facilitating creative work and students may also need to produce critical commentary, discourses on literary theory, genre, and the process of writing, but those facets are beyond the scope of this article.

Primary definitions of 'Tutor' include the notions of one who teaches or instructs: this definition, in the context of creative writing, raises the question of what can be taught. Elements of craft and technique such as prosody, sonics, plot and character development may be taught by instruction or lecture, as may basic tenets of writing such as avoiding cliché and redundancy. However, creativity is normally defined as a personal quality or ability (Chambers 21st Century Dictionary) so, logically, can not be imparted through teaching when teaching is defined as instruction (Merriam-Webster and Chambers). It is clear that creative writing can be learned, as evidenced by the development of writers through creative writing courses. As Graeme Harper says in his book *Teaching Creative Writing*:

'As a student and teacher of creative writing who observed not only the development of my own craft but also that of my colleagues and then my students in the rich, varied soil of the writing workshop, I knew that there was much more going on than the care and feeding of a handful of seeds.' (p150)

If creative writing can be learned, yet not taught by instruction, it is clear that there is something different in the role of the tutor in this context, as Nigel McLoughlin describes:

'[T]he strategies will however rely largely on student-centred methodologies - empowering the student as the active agent of their own learning and the tutors as facilitators, mentors and guides in that learning. I think the strategies must also empower students to analyze the processes of their own learning (and their own creativity), either formally or informally in order to find techniques and methodologies best suited to them as individuals.'

I have proposed that the creative writing tutor's role is that of a facilitator: 'facilitate' is defined as 'to make something easy or easier to do or achieve' (Chambers 21st Century Dictionary); yet if the tutor's role in the development of students' creative work were only to encourage, or to create a writerly space in the classroom and workshop, then one would have to question whether learning could take place, or whether that sort of teaching belonged in an academic setting. The stimulation and enabling of students' creative writing is but a small part of the tutor's role as facilitator: one of the students interviewed for Dr Steve May's research states '[L]ots of times you'll sit there and read something out and everyone goes, yeah that was really good. That

doesn't help' (43); students need to develop critical sensibilities, of their own and others' work, if they are to develop as writers beyond the first draft stage. This not only means having the ability to be critical but also learning to sift and process feedback on their own work in order to use critique to best effect in revision. This development may be partly facilitated through the tutor's modelling critique of published work, discussions, and close reading but it is the students' practice of giving and receiving critique, under the guidance of a skilled facilitator, that will build the confidence necessary to effectively revise work to the highest possible standard. Most students' practice of critique takes place within a workshop setting, which is where the tutors' skills in facilitation are most needed.

'At its best, the workshop provides a constructive and egalitarian environment where the students and the teacher form a support network and a forum where new work gets valuable feedback and questions are raised about the work for the author to think about.' (McLoughlin 2006)

'...workshops can be stimulating places where an honest exchange of views can bring about learning and insights into how writing affects a reader.' (Bell 2004)

However, no workshop will operate 'at its best' without a leader or facilitator because it is dependent on the personalities involved: any workshop will include those who are more dominant and those who are more diffident; those who are confident and those who are feeling inadequate. These factors are not static: workshop members will constantly shift along a continuum between confidence and inadequacy with a resultant effect on the group dynamics. The tutor in a workshop needs the skills to control dominant members, who may intimidate others and create a culture of destructive group-think, and support less confident participants while remaining even handed and objective about work presented. They need to be able to draw out honest feedback that is about the writing and not the writer while being aware of the effect on those who are feeling inadequate. The tutor needs the skills to create an atmosphere where it is safe to take risks and where failure is acceptable while ensuring that it doesn't become a cosy mutual admiration society where growth is stifled by the lack of challenge. To manage all the variables of a workshop in this way, the tutor needs the facilitation skills of active listening, challenging, observing and understanding body language, the ability to guide group dynamics and intervene when necessary. In addition to facilitation skills, the tutor needs to be able to draw on their own experience of the writing process and to inhabit the more traditional teacher role when issues of craft arise.

The wide range of skills that teaching creative writing demands of tutors is stretched still further by the particular vulnerability of the creative writing student. As another student interviewed by Dr Steve May illustrates:

'I think the hardest thing I found to get over...that was my work, and I was reading it to other people, and they were making comments, it felt that it was me that was up there and not the piece of work, to get used to that feeling that it's not me when they're saying, "You should have done it this way."' (May 2003:43)

In traditional disciplines a good teacher will be aware of any personal difficulties that may affect a student's work but creative writing students' vulnerabilities are constantly present through their

work in whatever forum it is presented, especially as they often work through those vulnerabilities in their creative work. The vulnerability of creative writing students has an impact on every aspect of a tutor's role. While tutors of more traditional disciplines can plan classes with regard only to the desired learning outcomes and effective teaching methodology, the creative writing tutor also has to take into account the possible emotional and psychological effect of any methodology on the students. This vulnerability is partly rooted in students' tendency to use personal and autobiographical material. Greg Light's research in students' perception of creative writing confirms that:

'[T]he general assumption is that creative writing taps into a reality which is more alive, true and spontaneous, a place in which to escape and come to terms with oneself. It is concerned with original, unmediated, authentic, private experience which can be discovered by the self and only by the self. The focus, in the vast majority of accounts, is on the personal (as-private) and those characteristics associated with the personal: 'private experience', 'originality', 'self discovery', 'truth', 'freedom', 'creating/making', 'ownership', 'emotion', 'escape' and so on.' (Light 1995)

The students' perception of creative writing as personal and private, and as self-expression, is not found in other academic disciplines and appears to create tensions between the students' writing process and the demands of an academic course: the tutor is put in a position of needing to guide students' impulse of self-expression towards learning through critical feedback and literary discourse while maintaining a framework which enables objective assessment of material that invites a subjective response. The effect of students' tendency to draw on the personal and private in their writing is to make the giving of critical feedback a balancing act between being too cautious and being insensitive: too much caution and sensitivity will fail to stimulate development because students' weaknesses are glossed over, while rigorous criticism without regard to students' vulnerability may also inhibit learning as students retreat to defensive justification or lose confidence to such an extent that writing becomes impossible. The difficulty is compounded by the tutor's need to establish a different balance with each group they encounter as the students' ability to cope with critical feedback will vary in relation to their experience: a group of undergraduates fresh from A-levels are going to have little, if any, experience of workshop style feedback and will need a much gentler introduction to it than would, for instance, an MA creative writing group. The tutor's role is not to be therapist or counsellor; whatever the students' level of experience, the tutor needs to develop means of guiding students through a process of feedback and revision to a position of writing as craft rather than writing as therapeutic expression.

Autobiographical material is not the only factor in creative writing students' vulnerability. Writers, if they are to write anything that engages interest at all, are in an inherently vulnerable position, as McLoughlin shows:

'The creative writer must 'live on' as well as 'in' flickers of language, since it is through exploiting them via rhetorical tropes and imagery that all creative writers make their living.' (2006)

It can be seen that creative writers, inhabiting the instability between text and meaning, are thus constantly without sure footing and become more vulnerable as they attempt to forge new paths

between language and reality as it is perceived by the reader. Bravery and originality are valued in creative writing: publishers stress the fresh, the daring, and the original in press releases; novice writers are exhorted to stretch out of their comfort zones and experienced writers refer to taking risks. Bryan Podmore, in an article for NAWE, states '[T]here is no dispute that writing is a risky business'. (Podmore 2004a) However, the writers he interviews in this and a subsequent article are not able to offer a consistent elucidation of what risk is in the context of writing. Hilary Llewellyn-Williams says 'I get high starting a poem without knowing what it's going to reveal, what I'm going to discover. I have to risk that it'll reveal nothing, and be a failure; or that it'll reveal too much' (ibid). Philip Gross says 'I want readers to feel tempted... and make up their own minds. Is this risky? I hope so' (ibid). So many experienced writers use metaphors for danger and risk in talking about their writing process (even when not writing autobiographical material) that novice writers are left in no doubt that risk and vulnerability are expected of them if they are to develop as writers: they are to 'strip the soul naked' (Miro in Barron et al 1997:24), to 'walk into the maze blindfolded' (Atwood 2002:xviii). In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Margaret Atwood goes on to summarize a number of writers' perception of the process as a kind of darkness:

'Possibly, then, writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light.'(ibid)

Creative writing students have risk-taking and vulnerability modelled for them as desirable in this way, both in writers' discourses about writing and in publishers' lauding of daring and originality. This results in an extra facet of students' vulnerability which the tutor has to manage within their pedagogy but also creates tension and dichotomy with the epistemology of creative writing, particularly within the workshop model.

Nigel McLoughlin has suggested that creative writing students learn through workshops in a similar way to the way a child learns to talk:

'Likewise, when the student writer produces a good image, or a strong piece of description or characterization, the workshop points these up. These are encouraged. Weak writing, such as cliché or the over-use of abstraction, is likewise pointed up and discouraged. This very simple example shows how the writer begins to be initiated into another system. It is still the system of language, but it is a specialized arm of it, a system of heightened language, a system of creative writing. This too is pre-existing and this too must be taught. The processes are not dissimilar. Both depend on positive or negative reinforcement, both involve a 'mentor' experienced or expert in the system, both involve a learning process not unlike a 'biased random walk' where, as the initiate progresses up the degrees of expertise they do so by having 'constraints' put upon them which guide their learning: 'mama' means; 'googoo' doesn't; 'iron air biting' is interesting; 'red as a rose' is a cliché.' (McLoughlin 2006)

Students quickly learn to recognize the writing that garners praise and they also learn which critical comments are met with approval and which can leave a commentator isolated. However much we may wish a workshop to be what McLoughlin calls 'a constructive and egalitarian environment', the reality of group dynamics and human nature work against this aim. The tutor or workshop leader will be viewed as an authority on writing and the group's tendency will be to

exclude any member who consistently demonstrates different views. A workshop group's natural inclination will be towards encouraging work that is comfortable for them, i.e. work they can recognize as falling within bounds of what is usually praised. Rob Mimpriss, in his critical study of workshops, states:

'[T]he social structure of the group will also affect the relationship between reader and critic. Not everyone will feel willing to speak, and what they say will be influenced by the group dynamic as they learn how hard it is to be the only dissenting voice, to be cruel when others have been kind, or to damn one student's work after praising another's.' (Mimpriss 2002)

Without careful facilitation and moderation by the tutor, workshops can result in students producing well crafted work that is essentially all from the same mould. Philip Gross remarked in his 'Notes and Queries' (referring to poetry competitions, but could just as easily refer to what is produced in workshops):

'[I]t's not the mass of terrible poems that depress you; it's the ones that do nothing wrong. Suddenly you want to fling them from you and go rooting through the heap to find something, one thing, anything that isn't schooled, that doesn't try to please you, that has such cussed conviction in itself that it lets you read it but it really doesn't care. (Gross 2002)

This tendency of workshops to favour work that is safe and similar creates a dichotomy with the previously noted pressure to take risks: writing students not only inhabit the uneasy space between text and meaning, but also that between producing work that easily finds favour and the pressure to be daring and original. Autobiographical material; the inherent insecurity of creative writing; the pressure to take risks; and the tension created between that pressure and the workshop's natural inclination to the familiar and safe: all of these factors create conditions in which insecurity and vulnerability become the norm for creative writing students, thus offering extra demands and challenges to the creative writing tutor beyond that which could be expected in any other discipline.

An additional challenge for creative writing tutors is working within an objective framework for assessment when creative writing in any genre naturally invites subjective responses. In other disciplines, if a student can develop an argument and support it with primary and/or secondary sources then they can achieve a pass grade. This assessment framework will hold true however experimental or unusual the student's approach. In creative writing, while much assessment can be based on matters of craft and process, tutors will naturally have more knowledge and preference for some schools and styles of writing, yet have to suspend their subjective response to make an objective assessment of creative work. A full discussion about assessment is beyond the scope of this article but I note that some of the tutors interviewed by Dr Steve May, in his project for the English Subject Centre, argue for assessment of the creative element being only based on process, not product, which would be a resolution to this issue. (May: 73 - 76)

In conclusion, it can be seen how the particular needs of creative writing students demand skills from creative writing tutors that are additional to the teaching skills usually expected from tutors in other disciplines. Richard Teleky, in his Essay 'Entering the Silence', sees tutors as 'agents':

'[M]ost people would assume that it is possible to teach the basic skills of writing - but "creative" writing? At the very least it is possible to teach students some of the strategies used by literary writers - to look at their writing as models - as well as to encourage students whose work shows potential. But teachers of creative writing need to do much more than this. Their task is essentially a transformative one to help students connect to silence as a place for thought and for the tensions that can produce art. Put simply, creative writing teachers can be agents of transformation.' (Teleky 2001)

The vulnerability of creative writing students, at any level, creates a need for acute active listening and observation skills, and excellent group facilitation skills for leading workshops so that students may be guided in developing critical sensibilities but also guarded from the critical loss of confidence that can occur through badly judged negative feedback. The tutor also needs the skills to create a workshop space that is safe as well as challenging; a place where failure is acceptable, honesty is expected, and each student can gain insights into how their writing may affect a reader. The established practice of using writers as tutors on creative writing courses goes some way towards meeting these needs: writers understand, as other tutors may not, the insecurity of the space between text and meaning; the pressure to take risks and the tension that creates with the comfort of writing that which easily gains acceptance. Writers also understand the difficulties and vulnerabilities of autobiographical material: even if they don't regularly use autobiographical material, there is a strong likelihood that they will have done so at sometime in their writing lives. The quality of attention that writers need to focus on people and situations means that writers have an aptitude for the essential facilitation skills of acute observation and understanding of human behaviour and motivation. This is not to say, however, that all writers are natural facilitators and there is a case to be made for creative writing tutors to undergo facilitation skills training as well as teacher training if they are to guide students to fulfil their potential as creative, confident and self-sufficient writers who can continue to develop beyond the workshop.

A leader is best
When people barely know that he exists,
Not so good when people obey and acclaim him,
Worst when they despise him.
"Fail to honour people,
They fail to honour you;"
But of a good leader, who talks little
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,
They will all say, "We did this ourselves."

Lao Tzu, Tao Teh Ching (cited in Bentley, 1994:28)

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