

Cila Warncke on what's wrong with the teaching of creative writing – and how to fix it

ARE YOU WASTING YOUR MONEY?

There are three primary motives for doing a post-graduate degree in creative writing. They are: getting a qualification in order to teach creative writing; learning about the publishing business; and becoming a better and/or more successful writer. Unfortunately, creative writing programmes make no distinction between students who want to be the next Shakespeare and those who want to be the next Dan Brown; between aspiring teachers, and people who need help drafting a pitch. There is no logical reason why these students should be lumped together. It is a matter of convention and administrative convenience – and a recipe for dissatisfaction.

I did a Master's in Creative Writing after a decade in journalism, because I wanted to improve my writing. My gut said if I wanted to write fiction I just needed to write fiction. But the lure of a qualification, with its implicit promise of employability, convinced me to forfeit a year of my life and several thousand pounds. My experience as a student illustrated the absurdity of trying to turn creative writing into an academic exercise. Writing can be learned, but that

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Workshop model

The centrepiece of all creative writing programmes is the workshop which, in theory, is an enlightened space where rough drafts become nascent masterpieces by means of peer review. Great

literature is not written by committee, however. F Scott Fitzgerald rightly noted that 'one has to rely in the end on his own judgement'. Critical feedback can be valuable, but workshops tend to bog down in irrelevancies. 'You never get to the heart of a piece,' says Patrick Holloway, a student

at Glasgow University. 'Everybody has to say something, so they say, "This doesn't work for me", or "I don't like this line", but that's just personal taste. It takes away from what should be the heart of the discussion: What's the piece trying to do and how does it do it?'

One-to-one tutorials are potentially more helpful, or at least less likely to degenerate into arguments over the use of italics, but they encourage a prescriptive approach to writing. Orwell writes that: 'Every literary judgement consists in trumping up a set of rules to justify an instinctive preference.' When instructors are obliged to coach their responses as instructions it leads to terrible nonsense, like one class discussion where a fellow student said, in all seriousness, that writers are 'not supposed to use adverbs or adjectives'. I hoped our teacher would leap to the defence of the wild adverbial luxuriance of English, but she didn't. Why would she? Creative writing courses have to justify their existence, and ever-increasing fees, by telling students something. Glib pronouncements are antithetical to learning, but they pass for teaching. The trouble is, the stuff writers really need to know can't be taught, and admitting as much would be fatal to the current academic system.

There is no excuse for letting form rule function, though. Instead, creative writing courses need to figure out what is essential and how to help students access it. At a minimum, creative writers need: confidence, a solid grasp of English, discipline, problem-solving skills, literary resources, patience, and – above all – time.

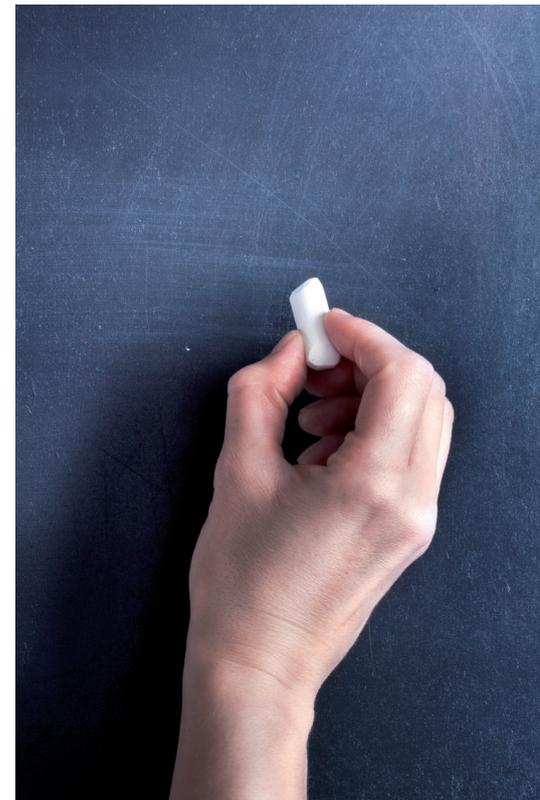
Back to basics

Creativity demands confidence which has to be based in a profound appreciation of English. Computer programmes can correct grammar errors, but if a student doesn't understand the basics of English how is she going to create something compelling?

Unfortunately, the word 'grammar' raises hackles; students think it is old-fashioned and unnecessary. Being a good writer doesn't necessarily mean sharing Gertrude Stein's enthusiasm for diagramming sentences,

though. Joan Didion, one of the finest sentence-smiths operating, admitted: 'Grammar is a piano I play by ear... All I know about grammar is its infinite power.'

The goal isn't to memorise linguistic formulae but to develop an understanding of the creative possibilities of language. That means reading, reading and more reading. Unfortunately it would be bad business for universities to tell students that the only thing they really need to become better



writers is a library card; and a worrying number of students seem to think that reading will impinge on their writing.

Mavis Gallant puts this notion firmly in its place in her essay 'What Is Style?': 'I have never heard a professional writer of any quality... say he would not read this or that for fear of corrupting or affecting his own [style], but I have heard it from would-be writers and amateurs.'

If students are ever to be more than 'would-be writers' they must read, and creative writing courses should make it their business to supply fantastic literary resources. Students shouldn't have to scarp over a single library copy of a novel, or traipse around town scouring second-hand stores for course texts. Anything assigned, or even recommended, by a tutor should be freely available to all the students. If that means handing out pre-loaded Kindles on the first day of term, so be it.

Once they are armed with books, it is up to students to be disciplined, take risks, ignore advice and nurture their own

creativity. A degree is no substitute for keen self-perception and the ability to work through difficulties. 'When you hit a wall,' Patti Smith advised, 'just kick it down.'

Writing courses can offer encouragement, succour and space to think, but figuring out how to kick down walls is up to the individual. Hunter S Thompson tried to improve his prose style by typing *The Great Gatsby*; Ernest Hemingway said: 'My working

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habits are simple: long periods of thinking, short periods of writing.' As with grammar, there is no right way to teach problem solving skills, but they must be learned.

Individual challenges

Perhaps the best thing universities can do is create challenges and leave students alone to work them out – an approach employed at Central Saint Martins, where fashion designer Ben Kirchhoff studied. 'We didn't have tutorials or anything like that,' he says. 'They just set us tasks and we had to figure things out our own way. People moaned but you ended up with very creative work.'

Time and patience are the crucial elements in transforming creative impulses into finished product. This means that writing courses need to shed the academic straitjacket and take a more relaxed approach. Creativity is not a horse that runs faster under the whip. Fitzgerald wrote to a friend that James Joyce was working twelve hours a day on *Finnegan's Wake* and hoped to be finished in four years; it took Jonathan Franzen nine years to write *Freedom*. There is no need to cram a Master's into a year. It is simply a matter of convention. Students should be allowed to use or misuse time at their discretion. No book or poem is better for being written in a rush.

In order to be truly useful, creative writing courses should be more flexible in

terms of content and teaching, as well as time. Rather than offering one or two rigidly formatted programmes universities could act as facilitators for a kind of modern literary salon. Grades, which are pointless anyway, should be banned. Tutors should offer as many literary survey and composition courses as they care to lead, which would encourage students to read widely and allow them to spend more time with instructors they admire. For example, I would have happily taken half-a-dozen seminars with my course convenor, instead of the paltry one permitted by the schedule.

Courses for horses

There should also be 'how-to' courses for students who want to write commercial, genre, or children's fiction, taught by writers in those fields. Finally, there need to be seminars on publishing, marketing, contracts and negotiation skills. But each part of the course should be self-contained, and students should be able to pick and choose freely, and proceed in their own time.

This would mean that students who want to earn an MA in order to teach could move quickly through the required elements, while would-be commercial fiction writers could learn the conventions of genre and how to tailor their writing to a particular market. Literature buffs, library geeks and indiscriminate lovers of words would be free to immerse themselves in books and literary culture, taking classes that satisfy their curiosity and feed their creative impulses.

This pay-as-you-go approach would, if nothing else, force students to take responsibility for their own learning and find their own sense of direction – two skills no would-be writer can survive without.

It would also liberate tutors from the pressure to teach and allow them to take the role of guide or mentor. This would make writing courses looser, even a little chaotic. They would be more reflective of writing than of academia. They might be less productive but ultimately they would be more creative. ■

HOW OTHER ARTS DO IT

Thinking about the teaching and learning of creative writing led me to wonder what the relationship is between education and inspiration in other arts. So I interviewed artists from two very different disciplines. Their conclusions were strikingly similar...

■ FASHION DESIGNER

'You can teach techniques but you can't necessarily teach talent. You study to develop your taste, to learn how to become more yourself professionally. It took me 10 years to get to where I am, but I would have been a designer no matter what. Choosing your own path is hard, but it's formative. The shit is horrible when you're in it, but it makes you the person you are. When I was teaching I saw far too many kids who should never have enrolled in a fashion course. It might be brutal to reject students who don't have talent, but it's not something you can learn. People need to think about what they want to do, instead of being pressured to just do a degree. The whole point of doing a creative course is to encourage someone to be creative, not to give them a booklet that says: 'this is how to be a designer.'

BENJAMIN KIRCHHOFF, from the award-winning design duo Meadham Kirchhoff

■ CONCERT PIANIST

'My best teachers were the ones who allowed me to find my own way of expressing things. Rather than teaching me tradition and the 'right' way they taught me to draw on what I already had, accept who I am, and build on that. Good teachers encourage discussion and new ideas. Practice is essential, but you can't play well if you don't have the right sound image in your head. If I find myself struggling with a piece I have to step back, not play for a while, and try to understand it. Once you understand something you can figure out how to translate it. Sometimes it is more important to imagine what you want to achieve rather than playing it constantly.'

NATALIA WILLIAMS-WANDOCH, award-winning concert pianist

THE PITCH for this feature

One of the things I'm regularly asked when I'm doing events is whether I think there's any point in creative writing courses. My usual answer is that it depends on the institution, the tutors and the course itself. Because, as Cila Warncke says, writing can be learned but it can't be taught. But what's the best way to create fertile ground for learning? I wondered if it would be possible to explore that idea in this issue. And then, serendipitously we got Cila's pitch. 'I would like to write a feature for *Mslexia* on teaching and learning in creative writing, comparing it to the experiences and learning processes of artists in other disciplines such as dance, music and design,' she wrote. 'I am not convinced, based on my experience, that writing courses necessarily get the balance right between providing feedback and encouraging students to develop their own standards and methods. On one hand, writers are encouraged to be highly individual compared to, say, musicians who learn by repetition and immersion. Yet at the same time, students are expected to submit their writing to the examination of a random group of peers – a process which I argue is antithetical to fine art.' Irresistible, really. And it shows how often synchronicity plays a key role in the writer's world. VAL MCDERMID

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