

**Versions of Creative Writing Teaching** by Louise Tondeur, published in *Writing and Education Magazine*, 2014.

## **Introduction**

Teachers are introducing the Creative Writing to schools, specialist publishers are producing critical work on Creative Writing teaching (for example, Harper 2006, Donnelly 2011, Beck 2012, Walker 2012) and more universities are providing specialist modules on teaching Creative Writing. This article surveys and summarises the different ways in which creative writing teaching is both perceived and delivered in the UK. It is particularly important to do so because of four things:

1. some of these approaches seem (at least on first reading) antagonistic to one another
2. as practitioners we can find ourselves talking at cross-purposes with colleagues who understand Creative Writing teaching differently
3. whether we like it or not, the experiences - and therefore the expectations - of students are gaining more monetary value in the Higher Education economy. What happens when students hold one particular version of Creative Writing in mind and the writers teaching a course another?<sup>1</sup>
4. It is interesting to look at the language we use to describe our teaching. For example, when I began teaching Creative Writing I had previously taught only drama and did not know that 'workshop' has a very specific meaning on writing courses, yet I was coming into contact with some writers for whom the workshop was synonymous with Creative Writing teaching.

This article also functions as a resource for those teachers who are new to the teaching of writing. In the process of putting the survey together I found myself thinking about my

own implicit biases and preferences. This kind of map (and it did begin life as a Mind Map) allows one to understand that these methods are different because of emphasis, and are not, after all, antagonistic. I have written recently elsewhere about some of the specifics of creative pedagogy (Tondeur 2013), in this article I take a much more general approach.<sup>2</sup>

The eight versions I survey here are, in alphabetical order: Beginners, Craft and Technique, Literature Teaching, Thematic, the Masterclass, Poetics / Contextual Studies, Spiritual / Therapeutic and the Writing Workshop. I look at what characterises them, including what the purpose of this type of course tends to be. I look at some of the key players, usually organisations involved in this kind of teaching. Of course all of these versions overlap with each other and none is wholly independent of the other, making the survey somewhat artificial. I make generalisations about Creative Writing teaching, which will not apply in many individual situations. This is deliberate, but only in order to create a map; my intention is not to exclude or make presumptions.

A quick note on my use of the word teaching: by teaching I am not referring to a top down model, rather I am using the word as shorthand. By teaching, I mean learning and teaching, that is, the interaction between participant and writer either one-to-one, in a small group, at a community centre, classroom, seminar room or a lecture hall, and I am inspired by Dave Cormier's "rhizomatic education" (Cormier 2008) where knowledge is "negotiated" and continually overlaps with other forms of knowing.

As I explain below, the eight 'versions' of Creative Writing teaching are:

1. Beginners,
2. Craft and Technique,
3. Literature Teaching,
4. Thematic,

5. the Masterclass,
6. Poetics / Contextual Studies,
7. Spiritual / Therapeutic and
8. the Writing Workshop.

## **Beginners Creative Writing**

### *What is it?*

Beginners Creative Writing (see for instance May 2010) includes short introductions to many types writing, such as poetry, fiction or life writing or focuses entirely on very short exercises with no emphasis on modes of writing at all. Small workshops might create a chance for participants to volunteer to read work aloud.

### *Why do it?*

Typically, students are looking for a form of self-expression, to build their confidence, or to improve communication skills. Often participants want to discover the necessary strategies to launch themselves into a writing project, so an important part of a beginners' class is advice on the next step.

### *Who teaches it?*

The key players are adult education centres, the Arvon Foundation, community centres, libraries, and literature development organisations such as Spread the Word.

### *Resources*

The best resource in this instance is probably observation of classes taught in adult education centres. Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones* (2005) is a bestselling beginners' writing book.

## **The craft and technique approach**

### *What is it?*

A tutor sets exercises on particular aspects of writing, such as imagery, form, rhythm, characterisation, plotting, editing and layout that are designed to improve participants' writing in some way. Even though they are sometimes seen as antithetical, this version is often combined with the workshop model.

#### *Why do it?*

Its general purpose is improvement and feedback (from peers or a tutor) and detailed focus on a particular area of writing. Also, short exercises are preparation for practising alone without guidance. It might serve to provide either a warm up or a creatively productive constraint to kick start a longer project.

#### *Who teaches it?*

The key players are adult education centres, university Creative Writing courses, and literature development organisations. Many mass-marketed 'how to' creative writing texts focus on craft and technique. They have a reputation for being formulaic, (although not all are and, tangentially, this is a reason for a writer to work with a writer / teacher who can act as guide) which can in turn make advocates of the workshop-only model suspicious of the idea that craft and technique can be taught.

#### *Resources*

Margret Geraghty's two books (2010, 2013) on five minute writing are a good place to start. I also like Peter Elbow's *Writing with Power* (1998).

### **Literature teaching**

#### *What is it?*

Here Creative Writing is a strategy for learning and teaching Literature. Participants write in particular forms or literary techniques or imitate and rework particular texts, in order to better understand them. If participants also give heed to craft and technique, including editing and revision, the exercise often fulfils its learning outcomes more successfully.

### *Why do it?*

It leads to better understanding of the text in question, enhanced student engagement and a recognition of link between Literature teaching and writing practice.

### *Who teaches it?*

The key players are school, college and university English Departments. Creative Writing strategies are also employed in other disciplines such as History or Education.

### *Resources*

Texts already on a syllabus or by writers the participants already know are a good place to start. Another way in might be to look at poetic forms, such as the villanelle, the sonnet or the Japanese Haiku (see Boland and Strand 2001).

## **The Masterclass**

### *What is it?*

A masterclass involves a well-known and highly experienced writer giving advice to a select group of participants, through an analysis of the work of three or four of them, or through a lecture. It often involves the guest speaker looking back on his / her own life and work.

### *Why do it?*

The main reason to take part in a masterclass is for inspiration, and to draw on the experiences on very well established writers.

### *Who teaches it?*

The key players are literary festivals, literature development organisations, university MA programmes, arts organisations and sometimes publishers, media outlets (such as the *Guardian*) and schools.

### *Resources*

The best resource is probably seeing one in action at a literary festival. There is a list of festivals on the British Council website.

## **Poetics / Contextual Studies**

### *What is it?*

Poetics or Contextual Studies involves thinking about the writing process, and responds to literary and cultural theory, with an emphasis on process rather than product.

Contextual Studies in Creative Writing might be characterised by an emphasis on political, literary or creative motivations for writing. It can involve alternative essay forms, such as the lyrical essay or the personal essay, or a hybrid of Creative Writing and a traditional mode of essay writing.

### *Why do it?*

This approach adds depth to student writing, it lends itself to the development of an academic discourse, it deals with "anxiety of influence" (Bloom 1973), and it leads to an understanding that there are many reasons to write (traditional publication only being one). Its purpose can also be about political change, because it involves thinking about writing and therefore thinking about the world.

### *Who teaches it?*

The key players are university Creative Writing courses, particularly at postgraduate level. For example, I used to teach a module called Creative Contexts at MA level. *Why Write?* is an undergraduate module at Royal Holloway developed by Dr Douglas Cowie and Dr Tim Jarvis. Other key players are the academic presses with a Creative Writing Studies imprint.

### *Resources*

Look at work from publishers such as Multilingual Matters, Professional and Higher, Palgrave and Routledge. Three different examples of this version of Creative Writing are

*Creative Writing Studies* (Harper and Kroll 2007), Robert Sheppard's 'The Necessity of Poetics' (2001) and George Orwell's *Why I Write* (1946).

### **Spiritual / Therapeutic Creative Writing**

I have put these two versions together although clearly one could emphasise the therapeutic without the spiritual and the other way round. I have grouped them because of an overlap in technique (journaling, for example) and general purpose (a deeper sense of self).

#### *What is it?*

This version of Creative Writing is characterised by an emphasis on self-expression, creativity and personal development, and creative recovery or journeying (see Bolton et al 2006 and Bolton 2011). At the same time, there is a tendency for the emphasis to shift away from the importance of redrafting, or critiquing the work of others. As well as journaling, techniques might include freewriting, sharing work in a supportive environment, work with a therapist and even shamanic journeying.

#### *Why do it?*

Self-expression, self-worth, freedom, a sense of a creative and spiritual journey, and self-discovery are emphasised. Healing is important in this version of creative writing, which can be humanist in outlook. For example, there could be a focus on palliative care (Darling 2005), addiction counselling, or grief, or on the need for better communication, peace promotion or community engagement (see Thaxton 2013).

#### *Who teaches it?*

The key players are Lapidus, for personal development, Julia Cameron (2006), for creative recovery, and other community organisations.

#### *Resources*

Start with the Lapidus website, or look at the work of Julia Cameron.

## **Thematic Creative Writing Teaching**

### *What is it?*

Creative Writing is used as a strategy to teach separate themes or ideas. Sometimes this is done in relation to sociocultural themes, or an issue viewed as difficult, for example in a Personal and Social Education or Humanities lesson. It might involve journalism, poetry, playwriting and storytelling as well as other strategies such as Drama and Art.

### *Why do it?*

The purpose of this version is its usefulness as a learning and teaching strategy and its ability to fulfil a given learning outcome. Although some practitioners also focus on honing and crafting the writing with participants.

### *Who teaches it?*

The key players are schools and community groups.

### *Resources*

You could use a writing craft and technique book, such as Margret Geraghty's *The Five Minute Writer* (2009), and adapt to create strategies that fit your particular lesson plan.

## **The Writing Workshop**

### *What is it?*

The Writing Workshop is probably the most well-rehearsed version of Creative Writing teaching. The workshop is characterised by participants (and usually a tutor) commenting on a piece of writing in a group setting, in writing or vocally. Work may be pre-read or read out loud. The recommended maximum group size is 15 (Holland 2003 and Munden 13). Workshops can also be carried out in small groups or in pairs.<sup>3</sup>

### *Why do it?*

Workshops are an opportunity for the writers involved to receive honest feedback. Regular workshops have the effect of turning writing practice into a habit. The focus is on improvement of the work, editing and redrafting. Another reason for the workshop is training in self-awareness, in preparation for working alone and for self-editing. Many writer / teachers have been through the workshop process themselves and in some circles it is almost a rite of passage. At Masters level, participants are more likely to be preparing for submission to a publisher. The writing workshop might also be viewed as career preparation for work in writing, publishing, teaching or higher education.

### *Who teaches it?*

As the workshop is ubiquitous, almost anywhere Creative Writing is taught uses a version of the workshop, but the key players are university Creative Writing courses, especially MA / MFA courses, adult education centres, the Arvon Foundation and literature development organisations.

### *Resources*

Recent histories of Creative Writing (see Dawson 2004, Pope 2005, Wandor 2008 and Beck 2012 for example) give accounts of the rise of the writing workshop. Other publications have used the workshop as their specific focus, such as Dianne Donnelly's *Does the Creative Writing Workshop Still Work?* (2011). If you are new to the writing workshop, you might also like the section on the topic in *The Creative Writing Coursebook* (Bell and Magrs 2001).

### **Concluding thoughts**

When compiling the map, and subsequently this survey article, I was particularly struck by the different purposes of Creative Writing teaching. Understanding the various forms our discipline can take can help us become self-aware as writers / teachers, and allows

us to engage with student expectations. It is likely that we will use and experience aspects of each or most of these versions of Creative Writing teaching within a single course, or even a single interaction.

Zadie Smith gave an interview for *Bold Type* on the publication of her first novel in 2000 when she said something that can leave a bad taste in the mouth of a Creative Writing tutor, or anyone who has found writing therapeutic:

“I never attended a creative writing class in my life. I have a horror of them; most writers’ groups moonlight as support groups for the kind of people who think that writing is therapeutic. Writing is the exact opposite of therapy. The best, the only real training you can get is from reading other people’s books.” (Smith 2000)

As Smith became a professor on New York University’s Creative Writing Programme ten years later, I assume that she has changed her mind, but I still find the quotation interesting because it suggests a kind of demarcation in the writing process. She does not mention the workshop, although she does contrast two different (seemingly polar opposite) forms of Creative Writing teaching: “writing [as] therapeutic” and “training [...] from reading other people’s books”. Actually, the divide is not as clearly demarcated as the quotation implies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Munden 2013 for more on the current outlook for Creative Writing and Higher Education.

<sup>2</sup> I will try to make the mind map available on my website.

<sup>3</sup> While I was creating the Mind Map for this survey, I was reading Susan Cain's *Quiet*, and it struck me how important it is that we consider the needs of introverted students during workshops.

### **Works Cited**

- Beck, H. (2012) *Teaching Creative Writing*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Bell, J. and Magrs, P. (2001) *The Creative Writing Coursebook*, London: Macmillan.
- Bloom, H. (1975) *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, Oxford: OUP.
- Boland, E. and Strand, M. (2001) *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, New York: Norton.
- Bolton, G. (2011) *Write Yourself: Creative Writing and Personal Development*, London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Bolton, G., Field, V. and Thompson, K. (2006) *Writing works: a resource handbook for therapeutic writing workshops and activities*, London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Cain, S. (2012) *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, New York: Penguin.
- Cameron, J. (1995) *The Artist's Way: A Course in Discovering and Recovering Your Creative Self*, New York: Pan.
- Cameron, J. (2006) *The Sound of Paper*, New York: Penguin.
- Cormier, D. (2008) 'Rhizomatic Education : Community as Curriculum', in *Innovate* 4:5. Available from: <http://davecormier.com/edblog/2008/06/03/rhizomatic-education-community-as-curriculum/> Accessed November 2013.
- Darling, J. (2005) *The Poetry Cure*, Northumberland: Bloodaxe.
- Dawson, P. (2004) *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*. London: Routledge.
- Donnelly, D. (2011) *Does the Creative Writing Workshop Still Work?* Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

- Elbow, P. (1998) *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*, New York: OUP.
- Geraghty, M. (2009) *The Five-Minute Writer: Exercise and inspiration in creative writing in five minutes a day*, London: How to.
- Geraghty, M. (2013) *More Five Minute Writing: 50 Inspiring Exercises In Creative Writing in Five Minutes a Day*, London: How to.
- Goldberg, N. (2005) *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, New York, Shambhala.
- Harper, G. and Kroll, J. (2007) *Creative Writing Studies*, Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Harper, G. (2006) *Teaching Creative Writing*, Continuum.
- Holland, S. (2003) *Creative Writing: A Good Practice Guide*. English Subject Centre Report Series, number 6, February 2003, p. 6.
- May, S. (2010) *Get Started in Creative Writing*, London: Teach Yourself.
- Munden, P. (2013) *Beyond the Benchmark: Creative Writing in Higher Education*, York: HEA. Available from:  
[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/disciplines/English/HEA\\_Beyond\\_the\\_Benchmark.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/disciplines/English/HEA_Beyond_the_Benchmark.pdf) [accessed November 2013]
- Orwell, G. (1946) *Why I Write*, rev. ed., 2004, London: Penguin.
- Pope, R. (2005) *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice*, London: Routledge.
- Smith, Z. (2000) 'A Conversation with Zadie Smith' *Bold Type*. Available from:  
<http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0700/smith/interview.html> Accessed January 2013.
- Sheppard, R. (2001) 'The Necessity of Poetics' in *Pores: A Journal of Poetics Research*, Vol. 1. Available from: <http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/1/> [accessed 5th Dec 2013]
- Thaxton, T. (2013) *Creative Writing in the Community: A Guide*, London: Bloomsbury.

Tondeur, L. (2013) 'A search for a creative pedagogy: How research can inform teaching practice in creative writing', in *TEXT*, Vol. 17: 2 October 2013. Available from: <http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct13/tondeur.htm> [Accessed November 2013].

Walker, E. (2012) *Teaching Creative Writing: Practical Approaches*, Cambridgeshire: Professional and Higher.

Wandor, M. (2008) *The Author Is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing after Theory: Creative Writing Reconceived*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

### **Organisations and other resources**

Arvon Foundation website: <http://www.arvonfoundation.org>

British Council website, list of literary festivals: <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/festivals>

Julia Cameron's website: <http://juliacameronlive.com>

Lapidus: <http://www.lapidus.org.uk>

Literature development organisations: see the National Association for Literature

Development website at: <http://www.literaturedevelopment.co.uk>

Mind Mapping. This article was originally conceived as a Mind Map using iMind Mapping software. See: <http://thinkbuzan.com>

Spread the Word website: <http://www.spreadtheword.org.uk>