

Paper

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Variations in Awareness: How Academics Teach Creative Writing in the First Year of University¹

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Introduction

This paper examines teaching and learning in two first-year university courses that incorporate the topic of “creative writing”. The formal descriptions of the subjects, their aims and objectives, their content and teaching methods, are documented and described in similar ways. When we examine what lecturers in these subjects believe the topics to be about, and how students are helped to understand them, we see different interpretations of what creative writing is, and what it takes to learn it as an academic subject.

Underpinning these different interpretations is an emphasis on one or more of three related areas of knowledge central to creative writing. Lecturers talk about the need for students to have something significant to say. Secondly, they emphasise that students need to understand the range of different ways in which practising writers have and do express themselves. Thirdly, they underscore the need for students to develop the skills and craft of the writer.

These three areas might be seen to represent the creative, the cognitive and the craft components of creative writing. In this paper I try to show how the ways in which lecturers talk about and teach creative writing can be represented in terms of the way they express their task as involving a tension between two or more of these three areas of knowledge. In maintaining this tension, teachers make different areas more or less salient to students, and can thus be said to be offering different descriptions of the academic content that constitutes creative writing and to be participating with their students in the social construction of the subject matter.

This investigation has examined, in some detail, how five lecturers who teach two creative writing topics help their students to come to know the subject. It has looked at the extent to which the formal, written curriculum is interpreted differently by different lecturers and what this means for how the lecturers themselves understand the subject as well as for what and how the students learn. In this paper I limit my discussion to the teaching and learning associated with three of these five lecturers.

Creative writing at tertiary level

Creative writing used to be something that was taught in primary schools and at the lower end of the secondary school. Its purpose and merits have been much debated and disagreed about. On the one hand, it was seen as a means of encouraging children with limited writing skills to practice writing and to think about and to develop their own potential for creative written communication. On the other hand, because the ability to work with words and sounds and with subtleties of meaning usually took priority over

formal grammar and syntax, it was often accused of being the cause of a perceived decline in standards of written English. English at university level, however, has traditionally had little to do with individual creative writing. Although students would sometimes have to write a sonnet, in order to understand better the structure of the poetic form, this detour into individual creativity was seen as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. The purpose of a degree course in English was to study English literature. The literature of the English language was read and admired and then commented upon and criticised. The growing influence, during the seventies, of sociological thought on literary theory has led to a change in ways of reading the great writers and even to the questioning of what was so exceptional about them. In this climate there has been pressure to analyse and consider new writing, to know more of the emotional and psychological as well as physical condition of contemporary men and women. Students brought up in a school system that encouraged creative writing have become eager partners with university

lecturers who see instruction in the craft of writing, together with instruction in the analysis and criticism of literature, as a potentially potent combination to improve the the study of literature and the quality of future writing. Over the past decade there has been a growing emphasis on encouraging and shaping the creative writing of university students, as well as helping them to appreciate the writing of established writers.

The courses

Both courses discussed here express the following formal aims: to study a range of works of fiction, drama and poetry; to develop students' abilities in textual analysis; to link the writing of students to the literary, theoretical and historical context of the course. One course (we will call it Course A) examines literature from Shakespeare's time to the present day. Australian literature is considered along with the literature of other English speaking countries. The other course (Course B) concentrates on post-war literature and has a predominance of Australian texts. In both courses between three and four weeks is dedicated to the topic of creative writing.

Course A has about 300 students enrolled and although there are common weekly lectures, the major part of the teaching of the creative writing component is undertaken in a one-hour tutorial of between twelve and twenty students. Course B has approximately 40 students and these students are taught, in this creative writing component of the course by two lecturers in two classes. As with Course A, Course B has a one hour lecture and a one-hour tutorial. Again it is the tutorial session in which the creative writing component is mainly taught.

Method

A series of interviews with the lecturers and observations of classes were undertaken for both courses. First, there was a general interview in which the purpose of study was explained and when formal information was gathered about the course. This was followed by a more probing interview where individual lecturers talked about their personal views of what the course was about and what they hoped to achieve. Prior to each of three

observations of teaching, lecturers were asked to talk about their aims for the session to be observed and the means by which they hoped to achieve these aims. Following the teaching sessions there were debriefing interviews; here lecturers talked about the extent to which they had achieved their intentions and the extent they thought the students had benefited as they had intended. Feedback, on how students felt they had benefited from the sessions was gathered through open-ended questionnaire and in some cases in discussion with the students. The written work of students was also collected and commented upon by the lecturers and discussed with the researcher.

In the present project, the process of teaching and learning and the social constitution of knowledge is investigated by addressing the following questions (see also Martin and Ramsden, 1992; Patrick, 1992; Balla et al, 1992):

What does knowledge of this subject consist of for this teacher?

How is knowledge represented to the students?

How are students brought into relationship with this knowledge – how is it taught?

How do students acquire this knowledge – how do they learn?

How do students respond?

Below I describe the teaching of three lecturers and the learning of their students. I first examine two lecturers involved in teaching Course A.

The case studies

Linda

Linda is an experienced teacher with several years of high school, as well as university teaching, to her credit. She has a reputation as a writer of prose and poetry in literary circles and she has an excellent reputation as a committed and inspiring teacher amongst her colleagues. She did not devise the subject but she has worked hard to get it in its present form and the creative writing part of it is largely the result of her influence.

What does knowledge of this subject consist of for this teacher?

Linda describes the subject as being about “linking the writing projects of students with the wider historical and theoretical work of literature”.

She sees the potential for students to develop as both writers and students of literature through imitating a variety of established modes and genres. She claims that in order to understand what literature is and what creative writing is, students need a feel for the historical perspective of where and how a genre emerged. They also need to know something of the technical and craft problems in reproducing that genre, so they need to try to write, for example, a sonnet, or a piece of poetry in the Romantic style. As well as the historical perspective, writers must be aware of the work of contemporary writers, what issues modern writers see as salient and how they tackle this:

“Students should make an attempt to develop work either in imitation of forms and styles encountered in the course, or as parody of them, or in some way be influenced by them. This goes for contemporary as well as historical literature.”

When Linda talks about the subject it is clear that for her the subject is about developing in students the skill of a literary writer. A necessary condition for developing this skill is an appreciation and ability to analyse and criticise existing literature but in the context of this creative writing subject the reading and the analysis is described as the means to an end, it is clearly not the major end in itself.

How is knowledge represented to the students?

Although Linda talks about the importance of a historical perspective in appreciating literature and in developing as a writer, it is almost always modern and, usually Australian writers, that are used in her classes to demonstrate the development of craft-knowledge. The creative writing topic for Linda's students involves listening closely to a short set piece. The piece is always read aloud, "because the sound of words is so important"; it involves analysing the way that piece is written, the syntax, the language, the imagery and how and why it works or does not work:

"Working means making us feel, as well as making us know, and the use of syntax as well as words is central to that. It's not just having a good vocab...It's much more than that it's knowing how to work with language like a craftsman, knowing how to fashion a sentence, a paragraph, a page to give the reader an experience that has to be shared".

It also involves student writing and having writing criticised, both by fellow students and by a lecturer. It involves working with a piece of writing and redrafting; and perhaps most importantly it involves enjoying and valuing language:

"I enjoy the subject and I enjoy the pieces I read, I want to get the group to feel the writing and to respond".

Linda describes doing the subject as a privilege, both for her and for the students:

"I'm lucky to work with these people, so many of them really want to write, and I guess they're lucky to be here as well".

The subject is represented with vigour as something joyful, to be felt and experienced as well as something to know and to reflect upon. Writers are represented as people who know about existing literature, who have something to say and who can make readers feel different things as well as know different things as a result of their writing.

How are students brought into a relationship with the subject matter?

Linda begins from the assumption that most students in the group are committed to learning to write better, that they will have done creative writing at school but that this will have emphasised imagination rather than skills and that they will have little idea of what is involved in the craft of writing. She sees her task as presenting them with writing that is "special" in some way, either because it is excellent writing and demonstrates a particular quality; or because it is the students' own writing; and she then sees her task as taking that writing apart:

"We are anatomists, getting to the bones of this body of writing and seeing what makes it work."

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, students have to write, and in this writing they should make use of the knowledge developed through reading and

analysis:

“They have to write; they have to get on and do it. It’s not about

inspiration in these classes, how can it be? They can wait on inspiration in the privacy of their own rooms perhaps. Here its about developing skill. Of course you hope what they read and hear will be a bit inspirational, but that’s not what I’m mainly concerned with”.

Linda’s teaching begins with the assumption that students do not understand how good writing is constructed, how the words and sentences and sounds work to create

meanings and emotion for readers. Her task is that of providing relevant material to take apart and to set an example in how to undertake appropriate analysis of the material.

She analyses and deconstructs the material together with the students. She does not lead the analysis, but she is clear about what she wants students to learn as a result of the analysis sessions and she selects and uses material accordingly. She is particularly skilled in using the comments and insights of students to move them towards her predetermined goals.

Linda puts most time and effort into planning and commenting on student writing. Students write in the class and they write outside of class and they bring their writing to the class for feedback and for advice on redrafting. The writing they do in this context is, however, controlled by the limits of set exercises designed to develop particular skills. The analysis of the set pieces is linked closely to the setting of writing exercises. Although in her discussion Linda makes assumptions that the professional writers under analysis have something to say and are striving to communicate that something, little attention is paid to what the students themselves might have to say. The work in class is in response to closed exercises and the feedback on work undertaken out of class does not appear to be aimed at developing the voice of the student writer.

“Students usually write about themselves and on the whole because they are very young their experiences are very limited. Its often useful to give them something to focus on”.

How do students acquire this understanding, and how do they respond?

Students come to this course because they want to be writers. Many write in their spare time and they are thirsty for guidance. Almost without exception, they respond eagerly to Linda’s systematic and enthusiastic teaching; the following comments are an indication of this:

“I feel that I’m getting somewhere”

“I feel that I’m being given some tools to work with”

“I have the ideas, I always have had, but this helps me to develop those ideas”

“I see it as liberating in the long term, though obviously you are working with restrictions to help you develop”

“This is the best subject you could do”

“It is a really worthwhile experience for anyone who is at all

interested in writing, or in reading for that matter”

In the students’ responses as well as in Linda’s own comments it is the development of the craft of writing which is seen as most salient.

Carol

Carol teaches the same course as Linda. She has less experience as a teacher, but has worked as an academic for ten years. Carol is a devotee of the creative writing topic but does not have a reputation as a writer herself.

What does knowledge of this subject consist of for this teacher?

Carol says it is important to read existing literature and to practise creative writing to be a good student of English. And it is being a good student of English, rather than being a creative writer, that is emphasised by Carol:

“Students need to stop thinking of there being a great divide between great literature and ordinary writing. They need to see it not as the greats and the rest of us, but more as a continuum. I want them to see that continuum. Through this subject they will have their own successes with writing and they will see that their writing can be worthy of consideration and is a part of that continuum”.

For Carol, the significance of the creative writing component is that it influences students’ perceptions of existing literature and of writers and poets:

“You can’t know how hard it is to write, a piece of romantic poetry, for example, until you’ve tried. You begin to get a whole new understanding of the people. It’s not just that its difficult, it’s that it requires a certain type of mind-set which is characteristic of the people of that time, to get into that mind-set is to understand something about the writing and the times that can’t be readily understood in any other way”.

Carol does sometimes talk about the craft of writing, but it is not central to her understanding of the subject, in the way it is with Linda:

“Students need help to write. It’s not necessarily something that comes naturally to a few gifted people, it’s something we can all be helped to do better and there are a number of exercises which are good to help with this. Most of us won’t be recognised for our writing but we can learn a lot ...a lot about literature and society and people by developing some skills in writing”.

For Linda, reading was a means to writing better; with Carol it appears that writing is a way of understanding existing literature better.

How is knowledge represented to the students?

Carol does not read out pieces in class, for her it is a matter of knowing rather than feeling, and literature is something that is read privately and analysed thoroughly rather than something which is felt and enjoyed and commented on spontaneously:

“Students need to work with these pieces and to think hard about them. They need to dig deeply and painstakingly. It’s not a matter of just responding intuitively its a matter of analysing intelligently”.

Carol is extremely knowledgeable about the pieces she discusses. She

provides detailed biographical and historical information together with the analysis. The analysis is detailed and systematic. Students are invited to respond to the analysis and they do; but as might be expected, their response is analytical rather than emotional.

For around one third of the time in the one-hour classes students are encouraged to write in response to set exercises and later to analyse their own and other students' writing. But the relationship of the exercises to the previous analysis is not made clear and as a result the writing exercises are seen as something separate to earlier analysis. How are students brought into a relationship with the subject matter? Carol begins her teaching from the assumption that students will know literature in a similar way to the way she knows it. Her task is to remind students of the most salient parts of writing under discussion and to help them to see the significance of these parts.

In Carol's pre-class interview she links the literary discussion with the writing exercise but in the classroom this link is not made. For instance, in one class, Carol looked at texts where dialogue was used in different ways. Later in the session students undertook an exercises involving writing dialogue, but there was no reference to the points raised in the analysis in the introduction of the exercise nor in the subsequent comments on student work. In reflecting on how the class had gone Carol was confident students had benefited, however, because "they see how hard it was to write good dialogue".

How do students acquire this understanding, and how do they respond? When undertaking the analysis Carol sees herself as a model that students can emulate:

"It's important that they see someone working with a piece. They need to see how you move from one thing to another, how you find linkages and make connections".

So it is assumed that students learn by watching and by listening and then by having the opportunity to undertake analysis themselves.

Carol does not make explicit how students are helped to develop as creative writers. They are given exercises and presumably undertaking the exercises helps them to perfect their writing. She does suggest, in interview, that guidance on how to write better might be gained from examining existing literature, but, as we have already seen, the classes make little linkage between the comments brought out in analysis and the writing tasks:

"There is advice in all we read that is pertinent to the students' own writing and will help them to improve, if only they would see the connection".

In their comments students emphasise the disconnected nature of the classes:

"We spend a lot of time reading and analysing, when this is supposed to be about writing"

"We get practice and we get some feedback, but there's too much analysis"

A number of students are, however, more positive about the classes:

"Most people here are quite good writers so you get a lot from each other"

"It's good to have the opportunity to write, to be made to write and

the exercises are quite useful for getting you started”

If we consider the three elements central to the subject (having something to say, literary analysis, and craft) Carol works mainly with analysis. Although she sometimes pays lip-service to the idea of “craft”, there is no evidence of this seriously impinging on what she teaches. Linda, on the

other hand, works with students to develop insights into existing literature and then uses these insights to inform their own writing.

Samantha

Samantha is the coordinator of Course B. There has been a creative writing component in the course for five years now, but Samantha explains that the function of that component has changed as the subject itself has developed. The subject now has a much stronger Australian literature component and the writing component is now closely linked to an appreciation of Australian writing. Samantha is not a writer herself, though she claims at least two former students who now have reputations as writers. She is a former high-school teacher and she is recognised by students and by her colleagues within the department to be a committed and excellent teacher.

What does knowledge of this subject consist of for this teacher?

Samantha finds it hard to answer this question. She admits that the curriculum outline which was written a couple of years ago is no longer accurate and that she has moved on in her thinking about this subject since then. Samantha is of the opinion that to write effectively students need a strong sense of self and identity and that to acquire this they must read a literature which accurately reflects their own experiences. The course has changed in order to give them a chance to read and think about and be informed by Australian writing:

“Students must reject the assumptions to which English is attached, assumptions about the way people behave, the way things look, assumptions in aesthetic and social values. It is not that English is incapable of accounting for our Australian experience, far from it, it is a rich and magnificent medium. But we have to develop an appropriate usage in order to do so. Students must read Australian literature if they are to know themselves in the way that students of English in England will know themselves and if they are to honestly project themselves as writers”. For Samantha then, this subject is about helping students understand themselves, though reading a literature relevant to their own experiences and then writing in a way which is “powerfully honest”. Like Linda and Carol, she also sees the reading of literature as important in helping students to develop a sense of what good literature is, but the writing of different and distant times and countries is used as a contrast to writing which truthfully declares the Australian experience.

“There is so much excellent writing, from everywhere...but this subject is not about appreciating other writing, it is about developing your own writing...what will help with that is more limited”.

Samantha’s aim is to help students see why Australian literature is appropriate for them; she definitely rejects the imitating of genres and styles used in earlier times:

“It’s OK to try to copy it, so long as you don’t deceive yourself that

you are being truly creative. I wouldn't want to tie my students to copying....I want to commit them to knowing themselves and developing a voice that is true to themselves. Students are already familiar with a good deal of literature. Through this course I can help them place that in a particular context, and a particular time and geographical location. I can help them see how the expression within those pieces is appropriate for that particular location, but more importantly I am about helping them develop their own expression and that must mean a focus on Australian writing and it must mean that they have practice".

Samantha talks about the necessary intuitive and cognitive dimensions of creative writing:

"There are people who can write well, but who haven't got in tune with what it is they need to say. There are others who know they have a voice, but can't find a way to make it heard."

Samantha argues that the perennial question for youth is "Who am I, what have I to say, and how can I be heard?". This subject attempts to address some of these important questions.

How is knowledge represented to the students?

It is made explicit in class and in circulated materials that writing involves having something to say and knowing how to say it. Some of the classes are concerned with helping students know what it is they have to say, others are concerned with helping them to say it. Set pieces are read before class and re-read in class, in the light of comments made by students on the pieces. Samantha comments on student comments she does not begin by undertaking an analysis. The students determine what is important or significant about a piece and this is discussed. Samantha keeps control of the discussion by harnessing students comments to two major areas of focus, first, what does this writing tell us about the background and experiences of the writer? Are they Australian? Are they European? How do we know? What are their concerns? Second, what works in this piece of writing and why?

How are students brought into a relationship with the subject?

Samantha begins from the assumption that her role is to draw out and develop the potential writer in students. This involves providing them with some suggestions on how they might make sense of existing literature, particularly Australian literature, or literature which expresses things close to their own experience. It involves helping them to clarify their ideas about what works in writing and why and when it works. It involves providing them with opportunities and stimulus to write themselves and it also involves providing them with feedback and encouraging other students to give feedback.

The exercises designed to stimulate class writing are intended to develop what Samantha calls the intuitive or the cognitive aspect of writing, or, in some cases, the exercises are intended to bring these two aspects together. The writing of students is deposited in a central pile, it is then picked up at random by other students and read to the group as a whole and commented upon. The writing is often, subsequently typed up by

Samantha for easier reading and for consideration at a later time. How do students acquire this understanding, and how do they respond? Samantha believes that successful writing involves the development of an awareness of what good writing is; That is why students must read a great deal and must think about the writing when they are reading. In that reflection they must consider the relation between the writer, the experience and the topic they are writing about and they must consider the extent to which there is harmony between these things:

“The intuitive, the way a writer feels in a million subtle ways about a topic, should control the language and imagery and syntax. But the skill of the writer, the cognitive, the mind must work with this to gain maximum impact. Good writing is about a tension between an emotional response and a controlled expression, the one must not compromise the other”.

Samantha encourages students to see what it is she sees to be important in a range of professional writing. She encourages discussion about this but she guides this discussion to ensure it stays close to what she sees as significant. She also encourages writing and discussion of the writing. She insists that writing practice and feedback on that practice is essential. As well as writing for class and for assignments, Samantha circulates notices of writing competitions throughout Australia and provides feedback on pieces students wish to submit.

Students respond positively to Samantha’s teaching. Some of them read the novels and plays and poetry which are mentioned in passing, and many of them undertake writing which is apart from the requirements of the course. Almost without exception students feel that Samantha’s classes help them to develop as writers and they all enjoy the classes and the work associated with those sessions:

“I didn’t come to this course because I expected to be a writer, or to do any writing. I just enjoy literature....But I think I have learned a lot about writing and about what’s involved”

“I do write now and I didn’t used to, well not except what I had to, but I do it because I think it helps me to get to know me and actually that’s something people of my age are a bit preoccupied with”

“It’s given me a new perspective on writing and on literature and on myself”

Discussion and conclusions

Of these three lecturers, indeed of the five whose teaching we studied, there is only one, Samantha, who helps her students to engage with all of three components of creative writing identified through this investigation. One of the teachers, Carol only seriously works with one component, that of literary analysis. Although she talks about the craft of writing, there is little in her teaching to assist students to understand how to develop the skills of the writer. The students themselves see no relation between the literary analysis they undertake. Linda emphasises craft and analysis and she works painstakingly to help students understand how they might learn from the writing of professionals and what this means in terms of developing specific writing skills. Although Linda talks about the ways in which professional writers develop

their individual voice this is not linked to a demonstrated concern for the development of voice in her own students. Samantha is the only example of a lecturer who talks about and makes explicit to students the ways in which the three components of voice, analysis and craft, inform the process and knowledge of creative writing.

We can conclude that these tertiary teachers define their topics and interpret their subject matter in different ways. As a consequence the experience of students and the content and quality of what they learn is also different. It is also clear that there is a relationship between what teachers say the subject is about and what and how they teach that subject. In our investigations the areas lecturers were most articulate about were those they most carefully thought through in terms of how they might teach and how and what students might learn.

Notes

(1) This paper describes work carried out as part of an ARC-funded project ("Conceptions of Teaching in Higher Education").

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