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# Learning to Write

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Essay:

# Learning to write

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**Catherine Cole**

A few months ago an article by the distinguished American author and academic Louis Menand appeared in the *New Yorker*, asking whether creative writing can or should be taught. Now I've nothing against the substance of Menand's question – about the methods and value of teaching – but I'm weary of it almost always being asked only of writing programs. Can music, for example, be taught? Should painting or literature or history be taught? Or, even more unlikely, engineering? These questions are never asked, and as a result writing academics spend a lot of time feeling defensive. Why are people always putting the question, and why do we even bother to answer it?

I suspect we respond because of a deep anxiety that we must be doing something wrong, despite all those successes – the alumni prizes and accolades, our ex-students on the podiums of writers' festivals or working as publishers and editors or literary agents or book reviewers. The graduates of writing programs don't go quietly into the politely constrained writing of the academy, the professional and anonymous writing of business or bureaucracy. Their books are out there and visible, and writing programs unashamedly trumpet their students' successes. It's impossible to read anything about the University of East Anglia's program without mention of Bradbury, McEwan, Ishiguro, Chevalier, Enright. Or, in the case of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, that it's produced sixteen Pulitzer Prize winners and three poet laureates. Australian writing programs have their stars as well, with their students' nominations for various literary awards prominent in marketing for the university's courses. The message to potential students: study with us and you too will become a great writer.

Creative writing's defensiveness also seems connected to the ways in which its academics are regarded in the academy. Despite the longevity of writing programs and their successes, writing academics are viewed with scepticism too, not just by academic colleagues but by their writing peers. If they're serious about their own writing, why aren't they driving a taxi or waiting on tables, like actors, or eking out life on a Literature Board grant? It's a variation on the old joke that those who can *do* and those who can't *teach* – and it denies that some writers' careers encompass both creative practice and education. Creativity in the academy is

viewed with suspicion, to paraphrase the educational scholar Erica McWilliam, because it removes writers from the romance of the artist in the garret who has no need of pedagogical engagement, and allows us to focus on ways of thinking and doing that are *observable and replicable processes* within *daily economic and social life*. (The italics are McWilliam's.) Thus creativity becomes less mystical, and once rendered so it can be engaged intentionally as an outcome or pedagogical work. The mystery disappears and writer-teachers, and by implication their writer-students, are suspected of selling out, their writing tainted with the formulaic, too academically or theoretically engaged, or, as an Australian publisher once joked, carrying within it 'the stink of the academy'.

As in any other academic program, questions need to be asked about the discipline and the manner in which it is taught. What role does the academy need to play in cultivating students' talents? The writing workshop or studio is the popular model for teaching, but does it serve the needs of writers in a world where technology, and its application within the discipline, is changing so rapidly? How should students engage with the wider community and the industry? What can be achieved in the two or three years of the degree? Most writing requires a slow gestation, and this is hardly served by practical exercises in writing workshops or rushed novels for MAs and PhDs. What do we offer students in quiet, reflective time? Are we leading them towards the ability to think, to listen quietly to their own thoughts, to read widely and ingest the world's finest literature in its many forms? Is what we are offering academically rigorous?

In response to this last question, anyone familiar with the contemporary academy knows the days are long gone when a course could be taught without structure or pedagogical rigour. Course guides are written and scrutinised by teaching and learning and accreditation committees to ensure the reading lists and teaching approaches are appropriate to an undergraduate or postgraduate degree. There must be learning outcomes and assessment items that are properly weighted to each exercise. In practice-based subjects such as writing, critical essays balance creative work.

This degree of structure and auditing has its detractors. The late Glenda Adams, a writer and academic at the University of Technology in Sydney, believed critical studies and structured teaching models constrained the creativity of the writing workshop. Educationalists such as Marilyn Strathern fear the over-auditing of courses constricts the space for experiment, indecision and ambiguity. And Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, that great expert on all things creative, argues against educators who turn creativity into a series of 'facile exercises which militate against harnessing energy and imagination'. McWilliam, too, thinks that teaching creativity in the academy requires a 'more nuanced judgement of the quality of those abilities and their outcomes than currently exists in mainstream teaching and assessment practices'.

The workshop, favoured by writing programs in Australia and overseas, remains a contested site. When badly led, workshops can be places of despair for students and teachers. I suspect most academics would applaud the educational rigour that has ended the laissez-faire approach to workshops by writers who write well but teach badly, were unprepared for or indifferent to their student's learning needs, and prompted students' complaints that they had learned nothing of wider literature, of writing or editing.

The American writing teacher and poet Reginald Shepherd has criticised writing workshops for reifying taste, valorising sincerity and enshrining self-expression, for blocking rather than enhancing students' development. Students are not encouraged to read widely and are ignorant of or uninterested in the historical and intellectual underpinnings of writing in all its forms. One student, he says, asked: Why are you making us read all this stuff and stifling our creativity? Also of concern to Shepherd is the workshop becoming a form of group psychotherapy, a place in which students express what's 'already inside them' as though it were fully formed and just waiting for an audience and a bit of prodding from the teacher to bring it all forth.

The writing workshop can offer a creative collegiality that inspires and sustains an emerging writer. But equally, as Shepherd has noted, workshops can breed resistance to ideas, to reading, and be brought down by students' resentment of criticism or suggestions for changes that would make a piece of writing better.

The writing workshop's greatest potential, especially at undergraduate level, is to enable developing writers to explore ideas through practice. Csikszentmihályi sees such creative 'capacity building' as requiring groups of students 'working in conjunction with each other and with staff, rather than in any individual student response to an assessment task'. This challenges the notion of writing as a solitary practice, allowing those students keen to work individually to write, to be read and edited by peers and teachers, and to develop a wider readership through a collective approach that allows greater play to the creative idea and all its potential.

Writing programs might also benefit from examining their resistance to the idea that developing writing skills is a slow process. Do we rush students towards publication at the expense of life-long development, experimentation or wider reading? By lauding those students who've 'made it' in a conservative publishing industry, we risk imparting a conservative sense of what constitutes fine writing. Commercial, yes. Difficult, no. British author Jenny Diski warns that writers who write for the love of it are in for a difficult time, citing a young woman friend who 'had a novel turned down by a publisher before they read it because they sent it first to [the English booksellers] WH Smith who said it wouldn't sell'. The writing academic sometimes seems doomed to become a literary agent, promoting those students whose work is marketable. And through this process, I'd argue, we limit

the way they think. Many students don't want to study philosophy or cultural and social theory, or examine literary movements that require a deep engagement. They want to write now, quickly, to get published. The university wants them to as well, because on their success rests the validation of the study, the writing programs.

**S**ome argue that the solution is to only offer writing at the postgraduate level, when students have already encountered the ideas they seem so reluctant to engage with in writing classes. There's also a view that undergraduates are too young and inexperienced to have lived life fully enough to write about it. For them, the postgraduate advocates argue, writing classes are always more about self-expression than engagement with ideas.

I disagree. Drusilla Modjeska and I once talked about memorable undergraduate students we'd taught – students who carried something special with them, even though they were young and inexperienced as writers. Modjeska mentioned Beth Yahp and Bernard Cohen and Gillian Mears, undergraduates in the early years of the UTS Writing Program. I thought about the recent edition of *Overland* that featured poems by Tom Lee and Sarah-Jane Smith, both remarkable students from their first days at university – not just because they were already demonstrating fine writing skills, but because they possessed a determination, a joy in writing and a will to explore the full potential of their ideas.

University writing programs should continue to build on this – teaching into and across literary studies and other disciplines. We should argue for rigour and slow writing and lifelong learning, for silent time and group activities, for argument and critical responses to bad writing, and for not shying away from complex or perplexing work because some students or industry people don't like it. Tough, we should argue. This is a university, and the intellect reigns here. In so doing, we allow our students to rejoice in the power of words. ■