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Uncertainty and Praxis in the Creative Writing Classroom

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Abstract:

According to music pedagogue Randall Allsup (2003: 157), praxis is "not simply the capacity to imagine alternative scenarios, but is instead the slow burning fuse of possibility *and* action." This paper will examine the role of uncertainty and praxis in the creative writing classroom, paying particular attention to the role of prose workshopping. First, it will offer an overview of praxis and then it will argue that, when successful, creative writing pedagogy offers praxis: that is, students learn to imagine their writing in different ways through workshopping (possibility) and to enact those changes through the re-writing process (action). Then, it will explore practical ways of addressing authority in the workshop arena as well as the importance of supplementary readings. (Allsup, Randall Everett. 2003. 'Praxis and the Possible: Thoughts on the Writings of Maxine Greene and Paulo Freire' Philosophy of Music Education Review 11.2: 157-169).

Biographical note:

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Introduction

If you do a database scan on creative writing and pedagogy, you'd think that creative writer lecturers are hacks without methodology or principle – rogue ruffians of the academy, who can be bought with the (ever elusive) promise of writing time. There's Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet's article "The Writing Community: A New Model for the Creative Writing Classroom" that begins by asking if creative writing instructors feel like impostors. They go on to admit that as creative writing teachers (305), "we still don't have a well-defined pedagogy. Truthfully, until seven years ago, we'd never even thought about the question of how we teach creative writing." Graham Mort and Lee Horsley (515) argue that the discipline lacks "easily defined academic content" and Paul Ketzle (127) argues that "creative writing pedagogy has been often absent, rarely intellectually rigorous, and occasionally even hostile to its own prospects as an academic discipline." Today I'm going to argue that this, quite frankly, is not true and that the workshop method – where students bring in creative work and fellow students critically engage with it under the guidance of the lecturer – has a clear academic agenda and provides a cornerstone for creative writing pedagogy. In fact, methodologically, it's a striking example of Paulo Freire's education-theory concept of praxis – the point where reflection meets action. That is, the workshopping student must reflect on what is not working in a story (all students participate in determining this) and commit to the action of rewriting the said story. With this thesis in mind, I will offer an overview of praxis (admittedly a resurrected term), how we can view the creative writing workshop as an example of this, one practical method for questioning the way 'authority' operates within the workshop and how supplementary reading lists are critical to the workshop and ideas of praxis.

Paulo Freire and notions of praxis

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian liberation theologist, political activist and academic theorist. He worked at national levels of government to advance education efforts before being imprisoned by the military in 1964. His text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) met critical acclaim and Paulo Freire received a visiting professorship at Harvard University. When Freire discussed praxis in *Pedaogogy of the Oppressed*, he was implicitly referencing a very specific cultural time and place – Brazil, 1970s. What indeed, can Australian academics in the twenty-first century glean from theory that had such vastly different temporal and contextual concerns? Or put another way, why should we revisit Freire as we work to theorise the creative writing workshop? While Freire may have passed on (he died of heart failure in 1997), his theories continue to play a critical role for academics engaged with notions of pedagogy. He attacked 'banking' models of teaching where students were receptors for knowledge and he supported active learning techniques. By questioning the teacher-student dichotomy, he positioned both teachers and students as learners.

So what is praxis, exactly? Freire popularised the concept but the term has a history dating back to Aristotle, Marx and Engels, and Sartre. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire defined praxis as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it." That is, praxis is the combination of being critically engaged and acting upon that engagement. Music pedagogue Allsup (159) views this engagement as both epistemological (perceiving, recognizing, linking) and action-based (composing, performing). So students must perceive, recognise and link creative concepts and then take action through the creation and performance of their texts. I would argue that creative writing operates in a similar way. Instead of composing scores, students are composing stories, scripts and poems. Instead of 'performing' them, they are reading them aloud and offering them to be read.

Joseph Raelin (65) connects praxis with 'reflective practice' when he states:

> Reflective practice is associated with praxis because the latter, derived from the Greek world for 'action,' refers not only to what one does but to how one thinks about what one does and what others do. It constitutes an interdependent process that links the human mind with the external world through activity with others.

This concept of reflective practice is critical to ideas of the creative writing workshop. First because a fundamental tenet of the workshop is that students not only write stories, but they must think about how they write stories and how their colleagues write stories. That is, in putting work out to be critiqued and critiquing fellow students' work, a platform for thinking about what one does and what others do is established. This process of critique is an interdependent one because students rely on each other to see how their stories 'stand up'. Frequently, students say 'that is not what I meant' in response to their peers' feedback. This kind of 'testing ground' with reader response links the writing process with the external world through activity with others.

Workshopping as Praxis

As educator Molly Travers notes (1999) the standard workshop process involves: students distributing work a week ahead, the teacher guiding workshop discussion where instruction on craft emerges and finally, the manuscripts are returned to writers. The rules to workshopping are not fixed. In some classes, students bring in work on the day of the workshop and read it aloud. Some teachers don't allow the workshopee to speak until the end of the lesson. In first-year subjects, some instructors make everyone in the room say something, going around the room rather than engaging in a discussion-type style of class participation. In others, students break into groups of two or three to discuss the work and then return to a larger class discussion. At the University of Wollongong, my workshops are between one and two hours long (where the number of works critiqued depends on word limits established beforehand) and take place after a one-hour lecture where outside literary reading has been discussed. This is critical for me as the readings contextualise

student work and provide specific strategies that we can draw on in the workshop setting (I'll return to this towards the end of this paper). Also, students hand in their workshopped pieces for final review and marks at the middle and end of session after they have had time to revise them according to the class suggestions. My point here is that workshopping as a pedagogical construct is not an immoveable entity. Yes, there are traditions associated with it, stemming back to its formal use in the Iowa Workshop, but it can shift according to the demands of a particular teacher or group of students.

In principle, the workshop model supports the fundamental tenet of reflective practice, which is "associated with the tradition of contextualized learning theory that posits that learning can occur in the midst of practice" (Raelin, 61). That is, learning takes place in the workshop, through the practice of writing, interrogating that writing and then revisiting the writing. For me, it's critical that students have time at the end of the workshop setting to respond to reader criticism. This is frequently when the workshopee explains authorial intention or wayward strategies. "But what I meant…" is frequently uttered at this point in the class. I emphasise to students that whatever it is they feel most pressed to say at this point is often linked with what's not coming across in the writing. The intention, for me, is that this process of inquiry "seeks to uncover and make explicit what one has planned, observed, or achieved in practice" (Raelin, 61).

The cooperative effort here, the critical importance of other students to the workshop practice, is something that must be treated cautiously as the ways we learn through practice can influence and contribute to the very process of that practice (Raelin, 63). That is, the way we practice writing in the classroom can impact on the way we practice writing. Is this problematic? Are we institutionalising our writers? Perhaps – students can become addicted to feedback. Students can write for the sake of getting positive or critical attention rather than for writing itself. As an Honours supervisor, I see a fair number of students who grapple with the more in-depth analysis and longer creative work that the Honours project entails. And many have admitted that what they really miss is the camaraderie and energy that comes from undergraduate workshopping.

Uncertainty, Participation and Authority in the Workshop

Certainly there are more difficulties associated with the workshop, as Blythe and Sweet readily point out: students aren't always given equal time, alpha students can dominate discussion, negative comments can adversely affect sensitive students, some writers use the classroom for therapy, etc. Of course these issues will arise. However, it seems to me the issue is not with the workshop process per say, but rather in the way that it is being run, something that instructors need to continually assess and modify. The workshop approach should not be thrown out with the proverbial bath water. In fact, as I expand

upon later, establishing firm workshop boundaries in the first few classes is necessary for the workshop to function at full capacity.

One issue with workshopping is that it is bound up with notions of uncertainty. The instructor cannot know what feedback students will offer. He/she cannot know how the student being workshopped will respond. The very same piece could ignite opposing discussions, depending on who happens to turn up to class. In this sense, there is no way that the creative writing lecturer can ever be prepared. This isn't to say that we don't prepare but that the classroom is an improvisational space that cannot be fully accounted for. Is this such a terrible thing? I don't think so. As O'Rourke (511) points out, "pedagogy is a process, not an event. We cannot fix it; the best we can do is articulate its principles and practices as clearly as we can for the specific, socially situated contexts in which we work."

One of the critical issues for me with workshopping is ensuring equitable student participation. The success of the workshop depends on the active engagement of students. This is two-fold: students must be willing to share their skills and knowledge and have space within the classroom to do so. Group dynamics obviously affect the willingness of students to offer input to the discussion. O'Rourke (506-7) calls on lecturers to attend to process "by making sure that people understand the role and purpose of the group, including how to give, receive, and act upon feedback." This sounds easy. In the first lecture, go over the rules of engagement. I do this. However, I've found that students inevitably have different levels of social awareness and this can affect the workshop dramatically. Raelin says (67) "we may assume that everyone has the psychological and even physical security of reflecting with others, but in fact this may not be the case for marginalized individuals or groups that may not be invited to the table". So how does one ensure that people feel safe to contribute? And conversely, how do you tell some students to stop feeling so safe in contributing because they're talking over their colleagues and interrupting the quieter students?

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (8) says there must be an: "ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community." I applaud hooks's sentiment but am interested in unpacking the words 'used constructively'. How do we use participation constructively in the creative writing workshop? To ensure students feel comfortable speaking, I use many strategies. I learn their names in the first class and call on students spontaneously, encouraging an interactive atmosphere. I make fun of myself and provide information about my rejection slips and writing failures. In early years, I use small group discussions to give students a chance to test their ideas before bringing them back to the larger group. I use positive encouragement, especially with shyer students. The issue I've been grappling with lately is not getting students to feel comfortable speaking but pulling back the reins on the ones who are too comfortable with the sound of their own voices.

In one prose workshop in particular, I had three alpha male contributors who could quite comfortably hold a workshop without listening to any other opinions. Add to that the politics between students (the talkers and the non-talkers breaking down along gender lines) and the body language (exaggerated eye rolling and the mimed blowing off of one's own head) and quite frankly I was at a loss. This experience made me re-think the role of the teacher as authority figure in the class. I became more 'hands-on' during workshop sessions and returned to a strict structure, monitoring things such as speaking time, the ratio of positive to negative comments, the non-speaking workshopee, etceteras.

I raise the issue of authority and the role of workshop teacher because in practice it's problematic stacked up against popular pedagogical ideals. As Raelin (69) states: "within the realm of praxis, the instructor's role is more that of the facilitator than the teacher." Or, as Blythe and Sweet (314) put it: in the ideal workshop "instructors tend to see themselves as facilitators and editors, not the creative writing versions of Solon the lawgiver." And Raelin 69) again: "In praxis, furthermore, the instructor is not necessarily viewed as the expert, if expertise constitutes the purveyance of objective truth introduced from some source exterior to the present context." I agree with these sentiments. Of course a teacher-dictator who doles out knowledge to students (via the banking system) will not be as successful as a teacher who helps students arrive at ideas by themselves. But in my experience, the ideal workshop where the teacher can meld into the background is very rare. First, students frequently aren't equitable with speaking time. Second, there may be something fundamentally wrong with a piece of writing (for example an inconsistent point-of-view schema) that fellow students fail to see, despite the use of leading questions. Third, something may come up that is so problematic that I would be remiss as a teacher to let it pass (for instance, before one workshop after we'd read Jhumpa Lahiri's story "A Temporary Matter" one student stated emphatically that she hated all Bengalis and all stories ever written about them).

Certainly I understand being sceptical of one's authority in the classroom. My authority as lecturer is context-based, derived in large part from institutional standing. But taking Katherine Haake's approach (cited in Ketzle 100-01) to "invent and teach classes about which I know nothing at all" as a means of interrogating this authority seems ridiculous. Why would a writer and teacher (with years spent working in the craft) hide their experience? Certainly I'm not advocating the teacher as the only site of knowledge (nor the teacher who is not interested in learning herself) but it seems there must be a middle ground. Just as student knowledge and input should be appreciated, so too, should the teacher's. That is, be aware of how authority is operating in the classroom, by all means interrogate it, but don't ignore critical lessons in craft because you're busy pretending it's not there. Ignoring authority will not eradicate it. And quite frankly, based on my recent 'hands-on' experiences, I'm not certain it should be eradicated. Handled with sensitivity and equity, authority can serve to provide important boundaries for students.

This raises the question of how lecturers can balance classroom authority with student-based learning. Or, what strategies can we use to keep workshop authority in check? Drama pedagogue Jonathan Cole (195) advocates that teachers demonstrate vulnerability: "the instructor's willingness to be vulnerable may inspire students to do the same, and therefore to actively confront the content without fear of judgement." This seems an easy one for creative writing lecturers to use: after all, the publishing world gives us plenty of opportunities to experience rejection and vulnerability. As stated earlier, I'm clear with students about the number of rejected manuscripts and stories that I've written for two reasons: first, it shows a concrete example of how difficult it is to get published (linking the act of writing to a world outside the classroom) and second, it demonstrates I'm not an omnipresent authority on matters of literature. It positions me within a larger publishing network and thus emphasises that my authority is not an everpresent one.

Cole (200) offers another strategy for negotiating authority in the classroom. Within the context of directing, he recommends "empowering actors to lead rehearsals." Within a workshop setting, this methodology can prove useful. The teacher can 'lead' the first few workshop sessions, being firm with structure, boundaries, and protocol. Then students 'lead' subsequent workshop sessions. "The director [or teacher] would then help to facilitate the exploration, and could serve as an outside eye to help the ensemble select the portions of the exploration that most strongly served the production" (200).

Student-Led Workshops: In Practice

In week ten this session (of a thirteen-week session) I changed the workshop style in one of my second-year subjects, WRIT222 'Writing Extended Prose'. The student whose work was being workshopped could nominate a fellow class member to lead their workshop discussion. I knew the students well, having taught most of them in a first session subject 'Writing Prose A'. The ensuing workshop time was not as focused as usual (sometimes the discussion strayed off topic and I had to remind the class to pay attention to the moderator) but it was still very useful – critical points were made and if I felt something had been overlooked and discussion was drawing to a close, I raised my hand like the students and made my point. This was a class that had issues with overtalking in the past and despite this, I was impressed with how balanced the discussion was. After class, I asked the students to write anonymous comments with feedback on how they thought it went. Of the thirteen responses, four were in favour of the peer-led workshop and nine were opposed. Some of the comments opposed to it, included:

- "No one respected my authority and there's too much temptation to be funny than productive."

- "The lecturer leading the workshop can be more effective as the authority of the lecturer can help them to keep control of the class …

and balance tension between students … rather than having the tutorial devolve into off-topic discussion."

- "The lecturer guiding and facilitating the exchange of ideas is definitely a <u>must</u>. I cannot stress this enough."
- "Those who moderated today seemed a little lost."

Some of the comments in favour of it, included:

- "I think the staff member should sit back for most of it. We are adults. We are not at school. Of course there should be boundaries but we are all old enough to know where to and where not to tread."
- "I think having peer facilitators can be really successful once the lecturer has set boundaries for the workshop. Ultimately, I think it lends to more accountability on the part of the students to not only interact but to act with a maturity that leads to consideration. I think having a lecturer constantly guiding conversation can actually inhibit discussion as it puts students in a more submissive role and results in less innovative ideas."

It's true that more students were in favour of the lecturer running the workshop. However, I think the final statement included above complicates a simple reading of those results. The student wrote that the new process "lends to more accountability on the part of the students to not only interact but to act with a maturity that leads to consideration" and that the lecturer guiding discussion "can actually inhibit discussion as it puts students in a more submissive role". This made me wonder if the negative responses may have had less to do with pedagogical effectiveness and more to do with bridging new comfort zones. If students are forced to be more active and take more responsibility for their actions, it follows that this might not always be the more comfortable process. Of course, too, it must be stated that this "mini-trial" occurred at a point in time where the students already had a model to follow, and their "self-determination" was a re-distribution of a traditional authority model rather than a rethinking of it.

I don't think an entire session of workshopping could be run in this way. That is, the idea of the workshop rules (one person speaks at a time, people raise hands if overtalking starts, the workshopee doesn't get to speak until the end, etc) kept cropping up again and again in the responses. Of the students in favour of the new way of workshopping, all said that the success was contingent upon students understanding these boundaries. But there's no reason that a session couldn't be broken up into two halves: the lecturer leads the first half of the workshops to establish relevant protocols and the students lead the second. The lecturer is certainly on-hand to support the student facilitator but lets the student take the reins.

Supplementary readings for the successful workshop

Argued thus far, the workshop can act as a site of critical reflection (where students contemplate their work) and action (where students make changes to their work before handing it in to the teacher). The use of supplementary readings is critical to this endeavour. First, literary readings can give students demonstrated examples of successful writing strategies and thus aid the reflective process. That is, a student can read Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants' and pick apart how subtext may be operating. If praxis depends on reflection and action, it's important that students have access to work outside themselves to help facilitate reflection.

Second, outside readings contextualise the workshop in a larger literary framework so that it doesn't become insular and self-indulgent. If students only read each other's work, then it's harder for them to contextualise themselves within a broad literary history. Outside readings can also demonstrate clear strategies that operate successfully so students have a larger repertoire to draw on when they're writing their own works.

And finally, reading itself has larger political ramifications that extend far beyond the classroom. As Mark Vonnegut (2008: 6) says:

> Reading and writing are in themselves subversive acts. What they subvert is the notion that things have to be the way they are, that you are alone, that no one has ever felt the way you have. What occurs to people when they read Kurt is that things are much more up for grabs than they thought they were. The world is a slightly different place just because they read a damn book. Imagine that.

For pedagogue Maxine Green, this ability to see the world as a place that is "up for grabs" is critical to concepts of praxis as it enables subjects to "look at things as if they could be otherwise" (Green 63 and Allsup 157). Of course, as Allsup notes (157), this reflection on how things could be otherwise must link in with action: "Praxis … is not simply the capacity to imagine alternative scenarios, but is instead the slow burning fuse of possibility and action." Thus, reading is important to the classroom precisely because of its value outside the classroom. It helps students re-think the world as a malleable one. And this linking in with the 'outside' world is critical because it disavows "the traditional separation between abstracted learning and real life" (Allsup, 158). It also demonstrates to students that if they are writing work with the hope that it will reach readers, then they need to think about writing with responsibility. As Harris notes (2002, 402):

> Hundreds of decisions are made in each text, and many of them have to do with the ways in which students feel enabled, contrained, limited, and/or threatened by the textural territory in to which they have written themselves. A writing teacher following the tenets of critical pedagogy would not just help the student find a transition sentence for the second paragraph or a public audience for that text; this teacher would ask that students what is at stake in

that paragraph and offer the student readings that have different cultural, political, or social paradigms to help the student resee his or her own text.

This dual approach where reading and writing inform each other (and the way the student considers the cultural, political and social paradigms operating in his/her own creative work and in broader texts) is particularly interesting in light of new literary ethics and the role of critical reading as political action (for further discussion of this, see Cosgrove, 2007).

In Conclusion

When coupled with outside readings, the workshop is an important pedagogical tool for creative writing that offers a clear model for praxis. It is frequently problematic when used in practice but it is malleable and teachers ought to consider how using their authority in different ways can affect its effectiveness. It is a key instrument in creative writing pedagogies and provides a forum for inquiry. For those interested in a creative writing student-centred liberatory pedagogy, it can provide a space where students "might use their writing to explore, to test ideas, to create dialogues, to express conflicts and tensions, to seek resolution of those tensions, to resist, to find power…" (Kyburz, 589).

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