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What do students learn when they do creative writing?

Abstract:

This essay explores learning and creativity, and connections between them in the practice and pedagogy of creative writing. Based on theories of creativity and learning, it proposes that when learners 'do' creative writing they 'come to know' – changing perceptions and gaining understanding in a particularly creative process of knowledge-building.

How can we measure ability and standards of learning in creative writing? This requires defining *what it is* that we teach within the frames of our discipline; what students actually learn; and how we can assess this learning in meaningful ways. It also requires, from the perspective of our discipline, that we teach 'for creativity' – that is, engaging with the difficult tension between creative freedom and the requirements of learning.

This paper is based on teaching undergraduate university creative writing. It is not a case study: it proposes to theorize learning in creative writing, arguing that the most effective learning occurs when students actively, autonomously and dialogically engage with their learning in suitable learning environments, and that creative writing is ideally suited to optimal learning. It also argues, however, that not all our students are gifted writers, and we have a responsibility to the learning and teaching for a wide range of learner abilities.

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This essay asks what students learn when they actively 'do' creative writing. My aim here is to propose some questions. One is whether learning, at its most effective, is also a creative process, and another is the extent to which creativity is a condition for effective learning. The essay considers learning and knowledge production in the context of university creative writing. Perceived conflicts between creative arts and academic research have focused on a distinction between creativity – 'organic' and difficult-to-measure or assess – and 'research', as a model of rational, measurable scientific understandings. This conflict is based on the devaluing of creativity within existing academic structures; the denial of the 'circuitous path of creative and critical research across all disciplines', which links creativity with critical, if not with 'factual, scientific' thinking (Brophy 1998: 213).[1] Ambiguously, creativity *is* valued in research, teaching and assessment practices – as originality and creative thinking, and in the recognition that creativity is essential in critical thinking. This confusion can be attributed to some extent to the difficulty of measuring creativity, of knowing how creativity 'works'. Studies on teaching and research in creative writing have so far not explored the possibility of a nexus of creativity and learning in this area.

Creativity and learning

What are the correlations between creativity and learning? Research on creativity in discipline areas of psychology, sociology, philosophy and education has made various attempts to define and measure this function of human achievement. This research deals with creativity in both the individual person and within interdependent systems of society and culture. There are myths and assumptions about creativity, both in education and in ideas about the creative artist, but it is creativity combined with rigor and discipline, and fostered in receptive social conditions, which leads to truly innovative outcomes. In this essay I want to examine the educational and learning conditions that might generate these outcomes, but also the connection of creativity and learning for those individual learners who may not come to creative writing with demonstrated 'talent' or special ability in writing.

There are many factors that contribute to creativity in addition to 'talent' and ability. Hans J Eysenck, in a consideration of criteria for possible measuring of creativity, identifies the difficulties of defining the creative person and suggests a 'set of cognitive, personality and environmental factors' that produce creativity (Boden 1994: 208). Mikhail Czikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity positions the creative individual within the tripartite, interdependent systemic relationships of *domain, field* and *person.* For Csikszentmihalyi creativity 'is any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain', and that it is 'important to remember, however, that a domain cannot be changed without the explicit or implicit consent of the field responsible for it' (Czikszentmihalyi 1997: 28). In many ways, this 'consent' does not differ from Eysenck's observation, which identifies creativity as the achievement 'accepted by

experts as being of … value' (Boden 1994: 200).[2] Yet, while discipline boundaries must determine what is, or is not, creative achievement, it is arguable that creative achievement is often dependent on a struggle for individuality within our social and educational systems. While these researchers acknowledge socio-cultural contexts as significant conditions for creativity, in his book *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1997) Czikszentmihalyi identifies elements of what makes a creative individual by interviewing 'ninety-one exceptional individuals' (Czikszentmihalyi 1997:12). Even research that considers the individual as one variable in a set of contextual or systemic conditions for creativity cannot avoid paying attention to the creative individual.[3]

Clearly, there are individual differences in learners when it comes to their experiences of creativity and education, and for most of our students creativity has been well and truly discouraged by a number of learning and assessment strategies (for example, learning verbatim responses, focus on exams, selected learning for assessment rather than performed understanding of knowledge) (Biggs 2006: 156-7). This applies to all learning contexts, not only in creative writing. Paul Ramsden observes: 'The assessment of students is a serious and often tragic enterprise' (Ramsden 1992: 181). Clearly, the dominance of assessment-driven learning discourages the risk-taking necessary for creativity. As Brophy points out, 'How creative can a student-writer or artist be, who must achieve a certain score out of one hundred? There is no doubt that tensions and contradictions are present in this process' (Brophy 1998:16). While students *want* to be creative, concerns about their degrees, GPAs and results cause anxiety and discouragement, and even if they are prepared to take risks in their classwork, the work submitted for assessment is often the 'safe' choice that does not fully demonstrate creative thinking.

In order to ascertain how to encourage creative learning it is appropriate to consider what occurs for the individual creator-learner whose creative functioning is thus hobbled by the learning environment. Without this consideration, much is omitted from the potential for the learner as a 'whole person'. Abraham Maslow's egalitarian, humanistic view of creativity offers a space for dealing with learners who are not especially gifted writers, or who have become very strategic learners, driven by assessment. Maslow sees creativity as part of 'self-actualization', a 'peak' state of being in the world that, he says, is to be differentiated from 'talent' and productive achievement. Rather, it is a sense of spontaneity, 'flow', an experience of rightness, timelessness, and full engagement in activity or work – 'in the cognition of the peak-experience, the will does not interfere. It is held in abeyance. It receives and doesn't demand. We cannot command the peak-experience. It happens *to* us' (Maslow 1968: 87). This form of creativity can inform any activity, and is available to any person.

For a creative writer, it is the process in which imagination is integrated *as language* in a dynamic, seemingly organic flow that has its own structuring mechanisms outside conscious awareness. Maslow distinguishes two processes: 'primary creativity', the creative play of the 'self-actualizing peak experience' – which is 'transcending, self-

forgetful' (Maslow 1968: 79) – and a 'secondary creativity' that marks the 'larger proportion of the production-in-the-world, the bridges, the houses … many scientific experiments and much literary work' (Maslow 1968: 144). He names the fusion of both activities that generates outcomes as 'integrated creativity'. In advocating the need for more play in education and challenging the fear of allowing non-rational processes to occur, Maslow also admits, if conditionally, to the value of the 'secondary experience' of creative production in achieving quality outcomes. He refers to such achievement as 'great work' requiring talent, which, he states, puts an end to the moment of peak experience:

> the great work needs not only the flash, the inspiration, the peak-experience; it also needs hard work, long training, unrelenting criticism, perfectionistic standards. In other words, succeeding upon the spontaneous is the deliberate; succeeding upon total acceptance comes criticism; succeeding upon intuition comes rigorous thought; succeeding upon daring comes caution; succeeding upon fantasy and imagination comes reality testing. Now come the questions, 'Is it true?' 'Will it be understood by the other?' 'Is its structure sound?' 'Does it stand the test of logic?' 'How will it do in the world?' 'Can I prove it?' Now come the comparisons, the judgments, the evaluations, the cold, calculating morning-after thoughts, the selections and the rejections'. (Maslow 1968: 143)

It is the inclusion of this process of 'secondary creativity' – the hard work, training, deliberation, criticism, thought, caution, testing and conceptual clarification – which is necessary to move from 'play' towards constructive knowledge. The proces combines with the 'primary' experience, filtering it through 'secondary' experiences of systems of categories and other knowledges that the individual either has already acquired, or which are organised with the input of new information. Indeed, Maslow points to 'integrated creativity' as 'creativity that uses both types of process easily and well, in good fusion, or in good succession' (Maslow 1968: 144).

It is this kind of apprehension which, I think, can be proposed as an optimal condition for learning – the use of language and conceptualising in language, which raises the creative experience to an integrated one. It lifts it from being 'the organization of our own inner world outlook' (Maslow 1968: 89) to the production of meaning that leads to knowledge – knowledge which, manifested in language, has the potential to alter perceptions. Integrated creativity is also learning; it creates a way of knowing and significantly, both parts of the process – the play and the conceptualisation in language which is constituted as reflection, critical thinking, awareness and skill – can be learned. This kind of learning has much to do with *writing*. The integration of the primary and secondary activities, where the latter involves conceptual understanding and being understood by others in the domain is essential to the creation of writing.

Creativity is dependent on its conditions. Eysenck's research to define elements with which to measure creativity establishes 'cognitive, personality, and environmental factors that are likely to interact in a multiplicative fashion to produce creative products and achievements' – *Cognitive* (Intelligence; Knowledge; Technical skills; Special talents); *Environmental* (Politico-religious, Cultural, Socioeconomic and Educational factors); *Personality* (Internal motivation; Confidence; Non-conformity; Creativity as a trait) (Boden 1994: 208-9). These variables are also feasibly conditions for learning, with each variable a contributing factor within the contexts, processes and environments in which individual learning occurs. And 'creative achievement', which varies in outcome subject to variable conditions, is also the achievement or outcome of learning. To understand creativity as 'achievement' is to recognise it as the outcome of process – such as thought process and the possibilities of cognitive change, which is learning.[4]

Both Eysenck's inclusion of 'special talents' and Csikszentmihalyi's study of specially creative individuals endorse a selective view of creative achievement. My argument is that creativity can be fostered in all learners, given the right conditions, although not all will produce 'great works'. There is certainly a place for more creativity in teaching and learning. As Maslow emphasises, creativity is not the privilege of 'special talent creativeness (Maslow 1968: 137). On the other hand, he views creative functioning in terms of 'perception' rather than as a productive exercise. He observes self-actualised creativeness (SA) as:

> a tendency to do *anything* creatively: e.g., housekeeping, teaching, etc. Frequently, it appeared that an essential aspect of SA creativeness was the special kind of perceptiveness that is exemplified by the child in the fable who saw that the king had no clothes on (this too contradicts the notion of creativity as products). Such people can see the fresh, the raw, the concrete, the idiographic, as well as the generic, the abstract, the rubricized, the categorized and the classified…. (Maslow 1968: 137)

Despite his insistence on creativity as perception, of experiencing 'simultaneously the ability to abstract without giving up concreteness and the ability to be concrete without giving up abstractness' (Maslow 1968: 89) *and* of being able to maintain both primary and secondary experiences, Maslow's example shows a convergence of both the creative/cognitive experience and the gaining of knowledge of the world through understanding. In the example of the child in 'The Emperor's New Clothes', perception, conceptualization and *language* all constitute the experience – after all, the child has to express his perceptions for them to be socially meaningful, which is the point of the story. Because *story* gives meaning to perception, Maslow's point emphasises the integration of openness and meaning-making as narrative form. What he does not go on to discuss is that the child's perception constitutes new knowledge; it represents a shift in understanding. Maslow's view of creativity and 'peak experience' of cognition is therefore reasonably also a condition for learning.

Creative writing is a conceptual activity for all who do it, and it includes choices, decisions and reflection. We like to think that the way it is approached in an educational context would be such as to constitute a qualitatively 'deep' approach to learning – arising 'from a felt need to engage the task appropriately and meaningfully' (Biggs 2006: 16) – as opposed to a more strategic, less fully-engaged 'surface' approach. In reality, we encounter a range of approaches to learning, which are based more on *conditions* than on personality traits and abilities. These approaches have to do with the structuring of tasks, with learning environments and *internal* motivation.

It can be argued that creative writing lends itself to this 'deep' approach to learning because in its conception and execution it is learner-centred, based on student activity and a personal engagement with the text. Constructivism (developed in cognitive psychology through the work of Lev Vygotsky, Piaget and others) focuses on the construction of knowledge by the learner – 'learners construct their own reality or at least interpret it based upon their perceptions of experiences, so an individual's knowledge is a function of one's prior experiences, mental structures, and beliefs that are used to interpret objects and events' (Jonassen 1994:34-35).[5] A 'phenomenographic' theory of learning, developed from the work of Marton and Säljö (1976), supports the idea that the learner's perspective defines what is learned, and it is changed by learning. This approach focuses on the relationship for the learner between an experienced or known phenomenon and its wider application, that is, not only *what* is learned, but what is important about that knowledge, and what other critics or writers think about it. It 'assumes that knowledge is relational, and therefore sets out to describe not what is known about *x*, as a natural scientist would, but how the idea of *x* can be experienced, where the relation is between knower and object' (Laurillard 1993: 35). This is a 'second order' level of learning that extends to the ability to abstract, contextualise and functionalise a concept as appropriate for a situation – which, for my argument, is the production of the creatively imagined, constructed, written text.

Language and knowledge

In creative writing, imaginative and conceptual meaning is expressed in language – the process of writing/reading/writing. This kind of learning therefore requires the development of language-use *as learning.* When we make the shift from 'primary' creativity to a level of more conscious language-use in responding to a task of creative writing, then it becomes knowledge. An example is a simple writing exercise stimulus task which I set for students to engage with memory – 'Write the words "I remember" and follow on by writing down a concrete detail or image. Without thinking about it much, repeat the return to each line with "I remember…". Don't explain – rather *allow* the details to build up the picture'. This develops a poem or short piece that is rich in detail. Significantly, *a structure* of some kind emerges, based on a range of remembered images, feelings and experiences, which was not envisaged before the writing began – a new idea, or a construction around an idea, is created. This can then be developed and

structured further. On the page, in language, creativity – as association, connotation and subconscious and conscious creative structuring – transforms into knowledge. We have now created something new. We understand something and know it in a new way, and significantly, coming to this knowledge was done at a subconscious level as we allowed the writing to emerge.[6]

This is why I do not want to suggest that the learning and writing process is entirely a conscious and deliberate one, although there is a constant stream of rational and intuitive decisions and choices in the process of reading/writing. As all writers know, a process comes into play when we engage in writing which 'makes meaning' in spite of conscious deliberations and beyond our conscious plans for our texts. Sue Woolfe investigates this 'sub-conscious' process of creating meaning in writing – 'thematic principles are often not intended but discovered by writers during or even just on finishing the creation, not *before* the creation' (Woolfe 2007: 17). These 'themata' are 'thrown up by the work – by its aesthetics and its explorations, none of which are known until they are written down. Writing them is knowing them' (Woolfe 2007: 100). In other words, the process of writing is a process of coming to know. Grace Paley says, 'You write what you don't know about what you know' – writing with a general 'feel' of something, and discovering it through the writing itself (Adams 1991: 28). Something of this 'allowing writing to happen' correlates with allowing our cognition to work in learning – that 'aha' moment when understanding is achieved in learning, when we have done much conscious work and struggled with a concept and at some point our understanding 'clicks' into place. This looks very much like the creativeness which we cannot command, that 'happens *to* us' when we are in '*full engagement*' in the work (Maslow 1968: 87). For the writer, this moment may be when exactly the right words or image to convey meaning appear on our page, or a solution to a structural or conceptual problem in the text 'appears'.

The point about creative writing is that it is impelled by a state of *un-knowing*. It is the anxiety of 'not understanding' that drives creativity – a state of conflict generated by the un-known promotes creative thought. In psychoanalytical terms, the compulsion for creative expression derives from the incapacity for expression of the psyche's repressed material. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900, 1929) Freud refers to the a-causal, non-relational representations of dreams: 'dreams have no means at their disposal for representing … logical relations between the dream-thoughts' (Leitch 2001: 926).[7] Dreams cannot create relational meaning. At best they can be understood through an additional level of interpretation, which I suggest is similar to the connection between creative process and language. Significantly, even when language enters the creative process, the state of unknowing persists. Adrienne Rich points out that 'poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don't know you know' (Rich 1980: 40). This connection between creative expression and coming to know through language is not *only* rational and causal. Language is spontaneous, figurative and imagistic, creating new structures of meaning. In learning – which we *assume* is rational, causal and leads to understanding – another level, an interpretative one, is imposed to develop the writing's

structure and language. This process is associative and intuitive as well as being linear and rational.

The new, structured knowledge achieved in writing has implications for our understanding of how we know the world. While written and formal construction in language is significant for learning, this kind of creative knowledge-construction also pushes the boundaries of our culture's preference for rational knowledge. It has long been recognised that creative writing offers a different kind of knowing. The eighteenth-century philosopher Giambattista Vico argued in 'The New Science' (1744) for an *imaginative* (or poetic) as well as a rational-historical approach to defining the nature of knowledge:

> as rational metaphysics teaches that men become all things by understanding them … imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by not understanding them …; and perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them. (Leitch 2001: 414)

Vico affirms the transformative impact of imaginative, poetic knowledge. His statement reads as an allegory of the creative writing process as well as its capacity for building knowledge and understanding.

For the twentieth-century social psychologist Lev Vygotsky, learning occurs through making structural changes in a series of 'spiral' developments from existing to new knowledge. In *Thought and Language* (1962) Vygotsky links thought development to language *as* the socio-cultural context: 'Thought development is determined by language ... The child's intellectual growth is contingent on his mastering the social means of thought, that is, language' (Vygotsky 1962: 51). Written language enters the socially symbolic realm; it is created as part of a wider discourse – as in Foucault's 'author function' (Leitch 2001: 1622-36) or Barthes' performative act of the 'scriptor' (Leitch 2001: 1466-70).[8] The text is a processed, realised form that enters the discursive arena by the 'circumstance' of its production and, in Edward Said's terms, it thus becomes 'worldly' (Said 1983: 35). This is the achieved outcome of creative work, done by the writer.

Since structuralist and poststructuralist theories of language intercepted notions of individual expressivity it is no longer possible to view language only as individualistic, as 'self-expression'. An individual's writing assumes and creates 'a world' – a dialogue with something outside the self, a 'being heard' or understood, and in turn, understanding the world, its objects and one's place *in relation* to them. It is not possible for any writer or speaker to dissociate from the fact that language constitutes social engagement. What is important here is that it is both the activity of the individual learner *and* the social

functioning of language that effects the learning. The positioning of creative writing in wider discursive conditions (education, classroom, reader responses, contexts, other texts) generates the process of gaining knowledge about, and through, the writing that students produce themselves – with the capacity *of being understood* by others.

In learning creative writing in this context, however, there is a danger of becoming too caught up structure and causality. In teaching this means walking a fine line between encouraging imaginative, creative freedom and focusing on learning outcomes. For this reason it is important to assess both process and product (achievement) – because it is the *process* of writing that constitutes learning. In a study conducted to establish qualitative differences in learning (Marton and Säljö 1976: 4) researchers concluded that the level of processing done by the learner determines the level of their learning. They emphasise the importance 'of recognizing the necessary link between the level of processing adopted by the student and the level of understanding reached', suggesting that 'students may need to refocus their attention on the underlying *meaning* of what they are required to study …' (Marton and Säljö II 1976: 125; my italics)

In producing creative writing, the complexity of the engagement is likely achieve a deep level of learning. The written text is meaningful for learners because it is created through their own perceptions. The inclusion of 'lived experience' provides a real space to relate learning to subjectivity. It is rare that university students have the opportunity to bring their own creative perceptions, creative ideas, thinking, individual worldview, life experiences, voices and histories into the learning environment. Yet there is a strong motivating factor in experiential learning (Evans 1992: 135).[9] The experiential quality of creative writing presents opportunities for the building of conceptual structures through reflection and abstraction: 'To solve a problem intelligently, one must first see it as one's own problem. That is, one must see it as an obstacle that obstructs one's progress towards a goal' (Von Glaserfeld 1995: 14).

Writing tasks present problems to be resolved throughout integrated creative and rewriting phases, in order to more fully realise the piece. The extent to which the problems are solved determines the success of the outcome, and the better able the writer is to understand the nature of the problems, the more likely they are to be able to address them. And as much as one might understand and know *about* a concept, being able to *apply* the concept in a practical way to a problem, and knowing *when* to apply this knowledge, demonstrates the highest form of 'functioning' knowledge and understanding (Biggs 2006: 41-43).

Learning environments

In the academic environment, functioning knowledge includes the abstract knowledge that gives it wider application. While it is necessary to experience a concept *in practice* before it can be identified, it also needs to be abstracted in order to be understood. 'Everyday knowledge is located in our experience of the world. Academic knowledge is

located in our experience of our experience of the world' (Laurillard 1993: 26). This is regarded as 'mediated' learning: 'Teaching as mediating learning involves constructing the environments which afford the learning of descriptions of the world. The means of access to the two types of knowledge is different. The one is direct, the other mediated' (Laurillard 1993: 26).[10]

It is this difference that contextualises the place of creative writing within the academy. Here, creative writing is more than learning about writing skills and techniques. Rather, it includes learning concepts about both text and writing contexts, and how, and more importantly when, to apply them to the writing. It requires learning not only *what* constitutes writing, but *how* these concepts of writing function in textual production. And this applies socially – not only to the writer's own work, but to his/her reading of other texts, including peer writing. The levels of achieved standards in effective learning will, one expects, reflect or exceed those of the wider writing and publishing world. This requires learning to discern, critically and with judgment, how textual strategies function in making meaning through language in societies and cultures, including our own. It means reflecting on one's writing to gain an understanding of its relationship to readers and to other current discourses. In order to do this, concepts about writing and texts in society are integral to academic creative writing as reading and textual study, and in reflection in the practice of writing.

Workshops

The interactive workshop is the usual context for teaching creative writing. It is at the point of entering the workshop with their writing and exposing it to an audience that the learner writer shifts the text from a 'private' sphere to a social environment. Language and meaning are now tested – between self and other, text and reader – and the dialogue that ensues provides the writer with new awareness of the extent of the writing's effectiveness for that group. The teacher, as part of the group, acts as mediator and guide. It is when writing engages with readers and evokes responses that learning about a text's effect occurs.

Of course, a great deal of *autonomous* learning has already been engaged in when the writing is individually constructed in the creative writing process. This is a significant component of learning. Working on a text in one's own time and space develops individual responsibility for the work and for one's learning. If students are to develop 'confidence in their ability to learn, belief in their power to perform and proven powers of judgement in unfamiliar situations, they need real experience of *being responsible and accountable for their own learning*' (Stephenson 1998: 7). It is also necessary to recognise that there are different types of learners even in situations of 'deep' learning; some learn best in interactive engagements, others learn better on their own. The writing process provides opportunities for different types of learning to function as it ranges continually between private, autonomous activity and dialogic, social activity. Within the workshop's social environment a different dimension to learning is added to the

autonomous, solitary act of writing. At its best this dimension of learning is constructive: it provides added knowledge about text that can be re-integrated as part of the rewriting, redrafting process. It also encourages further self-reflection *about* the writing – why it is that what the writer thought would work, does or does not work, and how this can be improved, changed, resolved. The interaction promotes thinking about language, structure, meaning, intention and outcome – a complex set of learning modes. It encourages the view that learning is about *process* as well as product.

Even if the workshop is part of a course structure that includes environments that are receptive to processes of creativity, the social dimension of the workshop initially generates anxiety and a sense of vulnerability and exposure. Learners demonstrate courage in participating in creative writing workshops. Essentially, they are expected to make 'public' writing that emerges from their creativity, perhaps even from their 'not understanding'. When students adapt to workshops, which, to their credit, they generally do, they tend to become freer from anxiety to learn within a dialogic environment. The focus of workshops should be on the *writing* rather than on the writer, so that as much as is possible the 'ego' can be left behind and the learner become more likely to be receptive, co-operative and able to negotiate. A constructive learning environment 'is centrally concerned with such matters as negotiation, cooperation, conflict, rhetoric, ritual, roles, social scenarios and the like, but avoids psychological explanations of the microsocial process' (Gergen 1995: 25). The paradox of perceiving as a 'social scenario' the placing an individual learner 'on the spot' in a workshop is actually effective because introducing their 'lived experience', their personal creative endeavour into the presence of others and having these accepted and taken seriously, promotes the conditions for meaningful learning and understanding. There is a real possibility that the individual will come to understandings of their writing *in interactive relations* with others, who are his readers.

This process models the concept of 'scaffolded' learning. In *Mind and Society* (1978) Vygotsky concludes that any learning has a previous history from the subject's environment and interactions. Vygotsky's focus on learning in children may reasonably be extended to later learning. He identifies the critical space of learning as:

> … the zone of proximal development [which]…. is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of *potential* development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky 1978: 86; my italics).

The emphasis is on the role of others in learning – a role that can be structured, facilitated. The process of writing follows a trajectory: initial writing is done, redrafted and rewritten (by the self/one's individual writing) > workshop (peers/teacher responses/input) > rewriting (self) > further continuing input (peers/teacher/self). This

process is scaffolded in that the learner is assisted (and assists himself) through a number of steps to achieve greater levels of conceptual awareness and understanding. In most instances of teaching Creative writing, the scaffolded learning begins with an initial response to a writing task and is then 'guided' through a series of incremental step – 'zones of proximal development'. For Vygotsky, learning operates with the child or learner 'is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of … independent developmental achievement' (Vygotsky 1978: 90).

This scaffolded knowledge-building in language is inherent in creative writing in a learner's practice (and, I would argue, in all writing practice). The written text is developed, largely, from a previously unarticulated and creative impulse and the writer returns to this 'primary' activity over and over again during a text's development, imaginatively re-entering its 'inner world' and expanding it. The connections of the subtle moves between 'primary' and 'secondary' activities, the processes of conceptualizing in language that occur in writing, resemble a spiral – continually returning towards itself, yet progressing towards more complex realisation. In bringing together these ideas of Vygotskian learning, creative expression and 'self–actualisation' I suggest that creative writing is a space for optimal learning: the spiral includes both a state of 'flow' and a development towards conceptual understanding that is formed in language.

The title of this paper might be amended to 'How do students learn …' rather than 'What do students learn …' because of its focus on processes of learning. Yet it is important to recognise the next stage in this discussion of issues about learning and creativity. This is the challenge of defining learning outcomes for creative writing while maintaining the space necessary for creativity and imagination. These outcomes should be aligned with learning processes, standards of conceptual understanding and functioning knowledge within the domain, in order to develop an effective mode of assessment in university creative writing.

Endnotes

1. Brophy cites a 1989 essay by Stephen Knight, 'Searching for Research', *Meanjin*, 48: 456-62.

2. Eysenck cites PE Vernon (1989) 'The Nature-Nurture Problem in Creativity', J.A. Glover, RR Ronning & CR Reynolds (eds), *Handbook of Creativity*, 93-110, NY, Plenum Press

3. This is an individualism that our Western models for creativity prefer (Freiman 2006).

4. It can also be argued that Eysenck's traits of personality, such as 'non-conformity' and 'creativity' may not necessarily be variables for learning, but the measure of creativity as 'achievement', still indicates cognitive shift or change of knowledge within the domain, congruent with advanced levels of learning.

5. Despite criticisms of relativism of this theory, constructivists also insist that 'much of reality is shared through a process of social negotiation' (Jonassen 1994: 35) (See also Freiman 2002).

6. Hence the advice not to talk about creative work before it's written, because once it is conceptually articulated it has become knowledge and won't engage that transition from creativity and feeling to language in the same way twice.

7. Freud, Sigmund (1900, 1929) *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (trans J Strachey *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* 24 vols 1953-74), Chapter VI, 'The Dream Work', section c. 'The Means of Representation in Dreams'.

8. In 'The Death of the Author' (1968) Barthes contrasts the 'author' to the 'scriptor', somewhat contradictorily in terms of temporality '… the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text … there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now'. I use Barthes' idea of writing as 'performative', though my discussion of learning through writing contrasts with Barthes statement that the 'scriptor' is 'in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing' (Leitch 1468). My point is that writing involves a variety of cognitive processes and (as Barthes *does* admit) it depends on what knowledge and experience precedes it.

9. I have pointed out elsewhere that the inclusion of lived experience has been perceived as a subversive element of creative writing in universities (Freiman 2001).

10. Laurillard cites Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (1962): 'A scientific concept involves from the first a "mediated" attitude towards its object' (102).

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