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Creativity, craft and the canon: Unpacking the cult(ure)of the workshop

Abstract:

According to Margaret Boden, creativity is 'not a special "faculty" but an aspect of human intelligence in general: in other words, it's grounded in everyday abilities such as conceptual thinking, perception, memory and reflective self-criticism' (2004: 1). These are all abilities developed in the creative writing workshop, a space that is supposed to facilitate student creativity. But what exactly is creativity? Does a workshop encourage it simply because students are asked to produce poems or stories? Is craft, so often focused on in workshops, implicated in the creative process? Craft, in fact, needs to be understood as more than technique, or practice of the art itself. In fact, knowledge of the conventions of practice and an historical context, or a sense of 'historical embeddedness' (gained from familiarity with some canon) is necessary to facilitate creativity in students and to develop a sense of aesthetic values. This paper unpacks the concepts of creativity, craft and the canon in order to promote a more fluid way of conceptualising workshops. The innovative pedagogy that results can demonstrate how creativity, practice and research cross-fertilise, making teachers more productive practitioners and researchers and students co-partners in the process. In the twenty-first century in the academy, 'writing is creative work and is rhetorical, professional, intellectual'.

Keywords:

Creativity – Workshop – Craft – Canon – Creative Process

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1 Introduction

According to Margaret Boden, creativity is 'not a special "faculty" but an aspect of human intelligence in general; in other words, it's grounded in everyday abilities such as conceptual thinking, perception, memory and reflective self-criticism' (Boden 2004: 1). These are all abilities developed in the creative writing workshop, a space that is supposed to facilitate student creativity, if topic descriptions are any guide. But what exactly is creativity? Does a workshop encourage it simply because students are asked to produce poems and stories, for example?

Is craft, so often focused on in workshops, implicated in the creative process? Do we have to understand craft, then, as more than technique or practice of the art itself? What about knowledge of the conventions of practice? Is familiarity with some canon (whether historical or contemporary) necessary to ground both student and teacher in order to make creativity possible? Many workshops integrate elements of all three – creativity, craft and the canon – in some proportion. But what theories might underpin their relationship?

This paper first attempts to unpack creativity, craft and the canon before moving to consider how those concepts influence particular workshop cultures. A more fluid way of conceptualising this now standard academic format as well as the role of the tutor can provide a pathway forward for creative writing as a discipline. Innovative pedagogy can demonstrate how creativity, practice and research cross-fertilise, making teachers more productive practitioners and researchers and students co-partners in the process. In the twenty-first century in the academy, 'writing is creative work **and is** rhetorical, professional, intellectual.'

2 What is Creativity?

Understanding creativity makes sense if we want to encourage a creative society, as Richard Florida maintains, 'yet our society continues to encourage the creative talents of a minority, while it neglects the creative capacities of many more' (Florida 2002: xiv). This position assumes, of course, that everyone is creative to some degree. Is this true? What exactly is creativity? More to the point, can our educational systems enhance it in students? Before the twentieth century, those questions would not have been asked, because scientific as well as popular attitudes would have deemed creativity too impalpable a concept, as hard to grasp as the evasive muses who supposedly bestowed it.

Several researchers have explored the history of theories of creativity (Boden 2004, Dacey and Lennon 1998, Sternberg 1988, 2003), but there is no space in this paper to canvass them all. 'Divine inspiration,' 'genetic inheritance' and 'nature versus nurture' theories (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 15) gave way to a variety of psychological schools of thought, some of which focused on cognitive processes (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 33). For my purposes, the two most useful to highlight first derive from the '*inspirational*' and '*romantic*' pre-twentieth-century views, which still feed into popular attitudes towards creativity today. They maintain that 'creativity, being humanity's crowning glory, is not to be sullied by the reductionist tentacles of

scientific explanation. In its unintelligibility is its splendour' (Boden 2004: 14). Creative people are unique, even if they are not inspired by the gods. Their mysterious gifts are unanalysable; hence researchers (and by extension teachers) cannot understand the processes underpinning them and certainly cannot hope to replicate creative behaviour in an educational setting.

More usefully, in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the focus has turned to the way in which the human mind generates and processes material: 'The cognitive approach to creativity seeks to understand the mental representations and processes underlying creative thought' (Sternberg 2003: 97). In a general sense, if creativity is 'the ability to produce new knowledge' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 3), researchers can investigate how the mind performs to achieve it. The kind of knowledge intended does not have to be esoteric to qualify as creative:

> Creativity is the ability to come up with ideas or artefacts that are *new*, *surprising* and *valuable*. 'Ideas' here include concepts, poems, musical compositions, scientific theories, cookery recipes, choreography, jokes – and so on. 'Artefacts' include paintings, sculptures, steam engines, vacuum cleaners, pottery, origami, penny whistles – and many other things you can name. (Boden 2004: 1)

Most of the named products of the creative individual could be generated, therefore, in a creative arts, science or engineering program at a university or technical school, let alone in a studio or at home. If the mental processes that produce them are not mysterious, then, how do they function?

The three forms of creativity Boden goes on to delineate suggest ways in which the workshop environment can stimulate creativity among students. They have to do with combining and exploring ideas or transforming conceptual spaces (Boden 2004: 3-6). The first form of creativity 'involves making unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas' (Boden 2004: 3), as poets do when they generate figurative language. Teachers often set exercises that encourage students to devise similes and metaphors or they orchestrate group poems in class, for example. This basic creative activity foregrounds the ability to discover both superficial and deep connections between things; it makes students really observe the world around them. To do it well requires 'a rich store of knowledge in the person's mind' (Boden 2004: 3), because those are the resources on which they will draw to discover analogies and combine ideas or images. As well, the combinations cannot be random, but must follow 'some intelligible conceptual pathway between them for the combination to "make sense"' (Boden 2004: 3). Even surreal imagery cannot rely purely on its novelty for effect then; it must be meaningful to someone other than the creator. The workshop audience is a useful testing-ground.

The second form involves 'conceptual spaces' or 'structured styles of thought' (Boden 2004: 4) such as artistic styles (writing, painting) or scientific theories; in fact 'any disciplined way of thinking that is familiar to (and valued by) a certain social group' (Boden 2004: 4). Creative people can think outside the square – the parameters of the style, that is – and move to a new space where they explore possibilities they, and others, had not perceived. Developing the potential in styles is something that artists do regularly. Accepting a commission or entering a themed contest might allow

them to locate possibilities where they had not previously noticed them. In the workshop context, students might be asked to compose something for a specific competition; or to translate one genre to another (rewrite or adapt a story into a play or script); or to experiment with an unfamiliar medium (the web, radio, etc); or to perform for different audiences.

The third type of creativity requires 're-routing' (Boden 2004: 5), or finding new pathways beyond accepted styles of thought. It moves the creator's and society's understanding to another level: 'The deepest cases of creativity involve someone's thinking something which, with respect to the conceptual spaces in their minds, they *couldn't* have thought before" (Boden 2004: 6). Boden here focuses on the transformative power of the highest creativity, the breakthroughs that make a new conceptual universe possible.

The first and second forms of creativity, however, seem eminently possible (given the right conditions) for the majority of people, since in general 'creative thinking consists of combinations and patterns of the same cognitive processes that are used in ordinary pursuits' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 7). High intelligence is not a prerequisite. Many creative processes, in fact, do not 'involve a major restructuring of acquired knowledge' but rather 'reproductive methods–that is, the application of past methods to a present task' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 7). Relevant 'methods' can be transmitted within a workshop environment.

Research generated by the 'biopsychosocial' view of creativity has positive implications for education. It asserts that an individual's creativity is affected by a complex of interrelated elements: 'biological, psychological, and social' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 8). Breaking these down, Dacey and Lennon argue that human creativity has five sources that stem from their biology, personality, cognitive processes, microsocietal and macrosocietal circumstances (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 10-11). The latter category includes the educational environment. Moreover, since creativity 'is a trait that develops over time' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 8), what happens in a classroom might impact on students' creative output in both the short and long-term, inculcating habits of thought that will allow them to 'pass out of these early stages into creative cognition and production' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 245) after graduation.

Let's examine closely now an idea already introduced – the idea of value – certainly something with which students, let alone professional artists, are preoccupied. Boden has applied the terms *new*, *surprising* and *valuable* (Boden 2004: 1) to creative production. As with any artistic or scientific discovery, how we judge its worth is critical. Boden summarises the problem in this way: 'Because creativity *by definition* involves not only novelty but value, and because values are highly variable, it follows that many arguments about creativity are rooted in disagreements about value' (Boden 2004: 10). Our society – and various interest groups within it – decide what is creative.

Let's unpack those adjectives modifying creative ideas because they will lead us to the next categories I investigate: technique or craft and historical context or tradition.

Boden breaks down creativity into two subclasses: 'psychological' or **P**-creativity and 'historical' or **H**-creativity:

> **P**-creativity involves coming up with a surprising, valuable idea that's new *to the person who comes up with it*. It doesn't matter how many people have had that idea before. But if a new idea is **H**-creative, that means that (so far as we know) no one else has had it before: it has arisen for the first time in human history. (Boden 2004: 2)

In other words, the 'Eureka' or 'Aha' factor has to function not only for the individual, but for that individual's culture. Some kind of 'social acceptance' (Boden 2004: 13) comes into play in evaluating creative products then. What I will call 'value acknowledgment' happens on a local through to a global stage. For example, within a school context the workshop audience applauds and a teacher marks the effort; within a professional one, peers award a literary prize; within a commercial one a publisher accepts a manuscript; within an international one judges bestow the Nobel Prize.

Of course creativity does not have to involve only lasting contributions to knowledge. What we might call 'lesser-order creativity' or, more positively, 'primary creativity' stimulates individuals and might lead over time to the higher levels. Robert Sternberg, who also believes that creativity comprises three components – 'intellectual, stylistic, and personality attributes' (Sternberg 1988: 145) – emphasises the social pressure, too: 'Because creativity is largely an attributional phenomenon, it is important to know what people believe creativity is in order to know how they attribute creativity to people' (Sternberg 1988: 145). One of the next logical questions then is how can we teach students to recognise what is *new*, *surprising* and *valuable* in their culture?

3 Mastering the Craft

We cannot talk about value without context: inevitably, we must turn to questions of technique or craft – or models and the masters who produce them. Craft is an overused term in discussions of the writing workshop and, unfortunately, it is often trotted out in order to support a restrictive approach to teaching; a will to disregard theory as well as historical knowledge (see Lim 2003, Mayers 2005, Celyn Jones 2006, et al). Particularly in the United States, craft is a focal point in the debate and usually means tutelage in the nuts and bolts of writing as well as in more general structural principles (understanding of genres, for example). Connecting craft to a deeper understanding of creativity, however, leads us to a much broader conception of what it means to be an expert and how one assesses an expert's products.

So far, I have looked at general definitions of creativity, but it is useful now to break them down to understand what preparation an individual needs in order to create. Dacey and Lennon analyse Amabile's work in order to do just that: 'Amabile's theory of the three components of creativity suggests that any creative performance or production requires domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant processes, and task motivation' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 81). 'Task motivation' will be discussed when we turn to the concept of rewards or assessment. 'Domain-relevant skills' is a key term in the above theory and bears directly on the preparation a creative person needs in order to excel in their particular field. Those teachers who focus on skills

development – for example, practice in dialogue or plotting – are offering 'domain-relevant skills.' Dacey and Lennon explain:

> 'Domain-relevant skills' refer to what we commonly call talent or expertise. A certain degree of technical skill is required before one can perform in any given domain of activity. One must have extensive familiarity with the relevant domain, including necessary factual and technical skills. For example, a good working knowledge of language, the ability to use metaphor and imagery, and a mastery of the principles of scansion might be considered domain-relevant skills for the poet. (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 81)

Training to acquire mastery of a field is not an unusual concept in other art forms; why does it provoke so much resistance in writing? Visit any major art museum and you will notice students sketching the Masters, preparing themselves by acquiring technical skills to enable them to contribute their own innovations. Recent research into creativity in general, therefore, reveals that having the capacity to be creative and the motivation must be accompanied by a degree of proficiency: 'To be sure, creativity demands expert knowledge of one type or another – of sonnets, sonatas, sine-waves, sewing ... And the more impressive the creativity, the more expert knowledge is typically involved' (Boden 2004: 23).

Seamus Heaney's differentiation between technique and craft points to how creativity involves pushing the boundaries of our ordinary processes of cognition so that we not only make something well, but make something new. As Cook explains it, for Heaney 'there is another kind of technique, one "that involves the discovery of ways to go out of . . . normal cognitive bounds," "a watermarking of your essential patterns of perception, voice and thought into the touch and texture of your lines"' (Heaney, cited Cook 2001:301). Exercising one's craft can lead to these imaginative breakthroughs, the kind of opening up of conceptual space that those practiced in a particular style can accomplish.

Many writers of the past have trained themselves informally through reading and debate (in print, in person, in coffee houses and pubs) with their peers. The point is that they have absorbed information and educated themselves given the opportunities their culture presented. In the twentieth century, this process has been formalised increasingly within tertiary writing programs (Myers 1996, Fenza 2000, 2008, et al). Universities, according to Florida, have become 'talent magnets and talent aggregators' (2002: 29). The arts are only following a pathway, then, that other fields such as science have pursued as a matter of course. The proper way in which writing should follow this institutional route is, of course, still contested. Some who argue for a craft emphasis only support, by implication, a theory of creativity that harks back to those that deem it mysterious and unanalysable. Within texts about writing, they doggedly insist that writing cannot be taught. Francine Prose, for instance, in *Reading Like a Writer* (2006), asserts of her experience:

> A workshop can be useful. A good teacher can show you how to edit your work. The right class can form the basis of a community that will help and sustain you.

> But that class, as helpful as it was, was not where I learned to write. (Prose 2006: 2)

Reading, she insists, is where she 'learned'. This pathway might be suitable for a self-confessed voracious reader since childhood, as Prose admits she was. But the average twenty-year-old has not followed that pathway. They have endured if not actively enjoyed the constant distractions of TV, computers, video and other electronic toys competing for attention throughout their lives. Prose, too, benefited from an excellent university education. When she does teach, in fact, she admits that she now runs a reading workshop alongside the writing one, to offer the kind of foundation lacking from the experience of many aspiring writers (Prose 2006: 10). Although she calls herself in this guise 'a cheerleader for literature' (Prose 2006: 10), the description of her teaching process demonstrates that she offers intensive training in language and interpretation that prepares creative individuals to take the next step forward.

Her final comment about the benefits of a reading versus a writing workshop are telling and lead naturally into this argument's next phase: the importance of models and some kind of tradition to contextualise an artistic apprenticeship. Prose realises that 'the workshop most often focuses on what a writer has done wrong, what needs to be fixed . . . whereas reading a masterpiece can inspire us by showing us how a writer does something brilliantly' (Prose 2006:11).

4 Masters of the Craft

At which masters feet do we sit, however? Are teachers now our first masters and do we let them choose for us? Are those the right questions? I would like to suggest that in fact creative writing as a discipline has short-changed itself and has not sufficiently theorised what can be gained from investigating its own traditions. Contemporary theories of creativity have much to contribute, given their focus on 'domain-relevant skills' and the concept of 'historical embeddedness' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 245), which I will address shortly. Let's look back for a moment to some of the first modern arguments in favour of expertise. In 1934, Ezra Pound devised one of the simplest to support expert artistic training in the *ABC of Reading*. He draws an analogy between poems and cars:

> You would think that anyone wanting to know about poetry would do one of two things or both, i.e., LOOK at it or listen to it. He might even think about it?
>
> And if he wanted advice he would go to someone who KNEW something about it.
>
> If you wanted to know something about an automobile, would you go to a man who had made one and driven it, or to a man who had merely heard about it? (Pound 1934: 30-31)

So expertise at least gives one knowledge that must underpin teaching, if not actual skill in teaching. Masters of artistic craft are not only critical to aspiring creators because they provide models of how to create successfully, however; they also teach lessons, either overtly or covertly, in how to discriminate. Their career experiences during their lifetimes or how their reputations have fared after they have died demonstrate the shifting temporal condition of aesthetic value. To return to Dacey's biopsychosocial theory of creativity, it reinforces the notion of interrelatedness in

human behaviour, which never 'occurs as an isolated activity. All actions are meaningful only in the context of the historical time in which they occur' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 248).

This 'historical embeddedness' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 248) is one of the four key elements in a general theory of human development called 'contextualism' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 245).[1] How creative one becomes is dependent on a number of factors, not simply innate capacity. Analyses of bursts of creative activity during certain historical periods highlight the fact that cultural conditions can facilitate artistic or scientific breakthroughs So the study of Elizabethan England, for example, should entail far more than the study of Shakespeare and his contemporaries; it should include the social and political culture that enabled drama to flourish. And that culture, of course, valued drama highly.

In the early twentieth century, T. S. Eliot's off-quoted essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919: 19) added a further dimension to Pound's call for expertise. Eliot enjoins apprentice writers to know the past so that they might absorb what the past 'knows' (Eliot 1919: 23-24). This knowledge not only includes the technical and thematic lessons the masters offer, but training in value discrimination. One of Eliot's novel arguments is that any truly new work of art shifts the balance of power; in other words, it forces literary culture not only to evaluate it as well as other current products but to re-evaluate the past because of the shock of its 'newness'.

The complex interrelationship between creators, the past and the future is also investigated by a contemporary of Eliot's, TE Hulme, whose philosophical writings underpinned the early twentieth century Imagist Movement in poetry. A postmodernist before his time, he theorises that individuals' aesthetic taste is never detached from history and culture, but is embedded in it: 'Just as physically you are not born that abstract entity, man, but the child of particular parents, so you are in matters of literary judgment. Your opinion is almost entirely of the literary history that came just before you' (Hulme 1924: 123). What Hulme suggests is that whether you agree or disagree with that history, you are conditioned by it simply by being aware of it and being next in line. I would add that even if you yourself are unaware, the culture around you is, so in that sense the past to some extent determines what both the elite and the popular deem valuable.

In the late twentieth century debates intensified about what exactly 'tradition' should contain – arguments about the canon, about marginalised groups excluded from the mainstream (women, minorities, et al), about who had the right to claim authority. Adrienne Rich conceptualised this process of how writers relate to the past as 're-vision – the act of ... seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction ...' (Rich 1971: 90). This process would facilitate the creation of new work, giving writers a clear sense of their mission in the present. These debates are too complex to engage with here. Suffice it to say that it makes sense for writing teachers to explain that, while they believe broad reading is critical, they also acknowledge the need to interrogate the notion of traditions and models. In summary, paying respects to one's ancestors and one's peers is not simply an academic exercise if significant creative production is the goal, because:

> expressing oneself relevantly requires a mastery of technique and material and a
> cultivated awareness of what, in the light of previous accomplishments, can and
> should be tried. Creativity is never just doing something different. It is doing
> something different that is significant at that precise point in the cultural tradition.
> (Dye 1986: 100)

Once acknowledged by their culture, creators might then proceed to make additional
breakthroughs. Social, financial and spiritual rewards are conducive to further
creativity.

There is one final point to be made about the benefits of exploring a discipline's
historical dimension. It addresses the question of why certain creative people in both
the arts and sciences have only been recognised for their achievements after their
lifetimes. Their act of perceiving new possibilities, bypassing or moving beyond
habitual styles of thought and opening up conceptual spaces is not necessarily
accompanied by a concomitant ability in society at large to understand the
breakthroughs. Learning this lesson from past historical experience is, thus, another
aspect of the training that occurs by engaging with predecessors.

Knowledge of one's field, thus, is mandatory. Now we can understand the adjectives
that Boden applies to creative products in a deeper sense. Engaging with technique and
historical and cultural context or, to use words familiar in the humanities, with the
craft and canon of a discipline, allow artistic practitioners to recognise what is *new,
surprising* and *valuable*, in both their own and others' work. This type of education
thus facilitates creativity.

Hence, on a small scale, basic reading if not expertise in a discipline can help a first-
year produce a competent exercise. On a broader scale a postgraduate will be equipped
to undertake a major project. The balance between skills training, tradition or context
and motivation will necessarily alter throughout an individual's life as their
circumstances alter. All those elements must be there to some degree, however, to
support creativity. As Martin Harrison says, 'Reading and writing may change
relationships like two boxers sparring with each other, but there is no doubt that both
must be in the ring as significant protagonists in the production and understanding of
meaning' (1999: 2). This focus on the tension between training and creating leads to a
closer inspection of the workshop, that hothouse environment where aspirations,
motivation, and talent – or desire, will and capacity – percolate in what is often an
uneasy mix under the watchful eye of a master.

5 Workshop Cult(ure)

The workshop is an odd creature, which can mutate from week to week, month to
month. It can have a stable or shifting population, depending upon who turns up for a
given meeting. Its agenda might alter. In fact, a range of factors condition what I call
workshop culture: the ways of behaving built up by a group's members, transmitted by
those who have participated in previous workshops, influenced by the teacher, leader,
facilitator, guru. Its institutional and physical location – position within a degree

structure or the actual building where it meets – affect its proceedings. It might even gather in cyberspace and members never set eyes on each other. It might develop rituals controlling who brings the biscuits and who keeps track of whose turn it is to be critiqued. Each one certainly develops its own etiquette.

In fact, within the word *culture* we find *cult* embedded, which foregrounds the rise of the cult of the author in the late twentieth century. The word derives from the Latin *cultus*, which means care as well as worship (*Macquarie Dictionary*). Devotees revere their literary gods, but how much care is taken of them by illustrious faculty is debatable. Competition between writing programs in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States encouraged universities to hire writers with national and international reputations (Lim 2003, Kroll 2006a), sometimes resulting in 'the workshop' as 'ego trip ... the Great author and his disciples' (Le Guin 2004: 251). Ardent fans with talent make devoted students, although the drawback might be a sameness among graduates, who produce writing with a recognisable flavour, or worse, the assembly-line or 'passionless McPoem or McFiction' (Harper and Vanderslice 2005: 212). Yet despite the variety of cultures proliferating in residential and off-campus programs, some elements seem remarkably common, if we can judge by university publicity as well as by the plethora of writing textbooks. The emphasis can be summarised in one simple sentence: Craft is King. Why is this true? Let us examine the history of the writing workshop to understand how an educational breakthrough for the study of literature became calcified into a structure that often closes creative doors instead of opens them.

Those who championed creative writing at the university level initially did not intend to train poets or novelists; they wanted to reform the study of literature, helping students to comprehend it 'from the inside' (Myers 1996: 8). Harvard began by introducing advanced composition in the 1880s (Myers 1996: 2). Teachers whose goal was enhancing literary study found effective strategies suggested by the idea of *work* or *craft*. When the desire to train the next generation of serious writers was added to the mix, the focus on workshops was confirmed. How do you learn to do something well? You offer models and learn from someone who knows the craft.

Let us look more closely at the term *workshop*. Jon Cook recalls the nineteenth-century slogan identifying 'Britain as the workshop of the world' (2001: 296), when workshops were focused on production, 'the activity of shaping materials by technological means into artefacts or commodities' (Cook 2001: 296). The UK history of the artistic workshop per se is quite different, therefore, from that of the US. It developed much later and its roots lay in the idea of allowing people ordinarily excluded from the educational and cultural mainstream – that is, the working class – access. Cook cites Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop (London, 1950s) and Raphael Samuel's History Workshop Movement, both of which encouraged its members to learn by doing (2001: 296-97). The first creative writing workshop course developed much later, and at the graduate level: Malcolm Bradbury and Angus Wilson's Creative Writing MA at the University of East Anglia. But they already had the American model to follow, which they had experienced.

It is worth remarking that creative writing at the university level in the UK had made its appearance before UEA's MA, but purely as a creative dissertation, not as something specifically taught in a workshop. Sylvia Plath had submitted a volume of poems in 1957 (Manhire 2002: 2-3) and, significantly, the Professor who pioneered creative writing in New Zealand in 1975 did his PhD at Cambridge (Manhire 2002: 2). It helped that the Department of Music at Victoria University at the time already had a course known as Original Composition. As Professor Bill Manhire, head of the current creative writing program, says, 'Original composition was at first essentially an assessment opportunity' (Manhire 2002: 3); workshops came later. Even then, no particular philosophy or theory unpinned their structure. Manhire characterises himself as 'one of the pre-professionals: a happy amateur who has grown into a set of activities, someone who has made things up as he went along' (Manhire 2002: 2).

On the other hand, the American writing workshop dedicated to producing serious artists dates from the first years of the twentieth century. David Myers credits George Pierce Baker at Harvard with designing the first – the '47 Workshop' in 1906 (Myers 1996: 68), focused on playwriting; its intention, 'by showing the inexperienced dramatist how experienced dramatists have solved problems similar to his own,' was 'to shorten a little the time of his apprenticeship.' Hence the name *workshop*' (Myers 1996: 69). Active, not passive education underpins it: 'Productivity, not mere knowledge, is the thing' (Myers 1996: 69). This focus on praxis, not theory, highlights the *work* in workshop.

But Baker firmly believed a thorough knowledge of the history of drama as well as familiarity with the contemporary scene was imperative, too. Only by steeping themselves in both these traditions could novice dramatists understand '*technique*' (Myers 1996: 69) – or 'essential' dramatic methods and strategies – differentiated from the idea of craft, attained through mere practice without context. At the dawn of workshopping, then, the idea was not to separate craft from its context, but to explore their connections in order to facilitate new creation. Unfortunately, as the century wore on, in many institutions the historical dimension was gradually diluted if not entirely lost. Teachers still used models but often not in a systematic way; the past functioned merely as an arbitrary repository of examples, not as a rich cultural storehouse and frame of reference for writers. In some cases, the only models offered were contemporary. The prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, founded in 1936, became the template for a legion of graduate programs; it still insists that 'writing cannot be taught but that writers can be encouraged' (www.uiowa.edu/~iww/about.htm). Their students bring the talent (and creativity); professionals only nurture it. Significantly, the British novelist, Russell Celyn Jones, has identified the recent burst of postgraduate programs in the UK as a direct response 'to a decline in editing skills among publishers and agents' (Celyn Jones 2001: 246). So here we are again – creative writing study boils down to craft.

Two other points that at first seem contradictory need to be made about the workshop's ethos. The first concerns the effect that the growing commercialisation of literature had; Tim Mayers suggests this is one reason that the focus on writing as a craft strengthened. For some, it became another 'type of work' (Mayers 2005: 67). Scanning current degree programs and short-term writers' conferences, we can see

how marketing elements have been added to study plans. The second point harks back to the theory that creativity is mysterious and that, consequently, writers can only be coaxed into finding their true voice: 'Because so many people clung to the notion that writers are born, not made, craft became virtually synonymous with the one small aspect of creative composition – technique – that could be taught' (Mayers 2005: 67).

Supported now by recent research in theories of creativity and methodologies for enhancing it, workshop culture can be rejuvenated. It can be conceived of as a rich site of interacting factors that together offer creative opportunities in the present and point towards options for the future: 'Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gardner ... have an interactionalist orientation. Their framework, which they call Domain-Individual-Field Interaction (DIFI), proposes that three subsystems interact to generate a creative product: the individual, the domain, and the field' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 85). The workshop is grounded in a particular domain – that of poetry, for example – which introduces students to a 'formalized body of knowledge' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 85). I have already discussed the concept of 'domain-relevant skills', which the teacher-professional helps students to acquire.

Through this expert teacher, it also offers access to that domain's field: 'A *field* is made up of the persons who support and contribute to the domain. The persons in the field will decide what new ideas or products become accepted into the domain. They therefore determine which efforts will be rewarded' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 85). Taking poetry again as an example, its field would comprise the teachers, critics, journal editors, publishers, contest or grants judges, literary festival organisers, et al, as well as 'the peer group of artists whose interaction defines styles and revolutions of taste' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 85). Access to the field is facilitated by teachers who are also writers; they become a nexus for the rich opportunities existing in the field. If 'an understanding of the historical and social context is necessary to valid knowledge about creativity' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 85) and to those who want to develop their own, then the workshop needs to address this type of knowledge. The workshop is, therefore, a culture where individuals prepare themselves to produce creative products and, in many cases, actually produce some that will be deemed by the field to have aesthetic value. That aspect of class time devoted to understanding the historical and social traditions relevant to a particular domain will, as previously argued, enable students to learn how to value their own and peers' work. It will also train them in evaluating what they will encounter in future in the wider culture among those practising in their field and in the arts in general.

6 Can I? Should I? Will I?: The Workshop as Motivator

Now let me turn to a factor mentioned in my original survey of creativity theory: motivation. Do individuals with the capacity ever ask themselves, 'Should I make time and mental space to create?' Certainly when I have asked students in writing classes why they have enrolled, a frequent response is that they will 'be made to write'. Almost as frequently, they want to know if they are 'wasting their time'. They want, therefore, evaluation and confirmation from a 'field representative'. What occurs in workshops, then, can directly bear on students' present and future creativity. Despite

the differences in maturity and skills' development between undergraduates and postgraduates, they both feel insecurity and crave support.

Research reveals that individuals are driven by intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Amabile, one of the first researchers to explore 'social influences on creativity' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 79), advanced 'the "intrinsic motivation principle"':

> When people are primarily motivated to do some creative activity by their own interest in and enjoyment of that activity, they may be more creative than they are when primarily motivated by some goal imposed on them by others ... Sylvia Plath, for example, appeared to be crippled for long periods of time by a concern with evaluation and competitions and the demands that others made on her. (Amabile, 1996, as quoted in Dacey and Lennon 1998: 79)

In fact, motivation is singled out in Amabile's triumvirate of components that must be present for creative production: 'domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant processes, and task motivation' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 81). Specifically, '"Task motivation" can be seen as the most important determinant between what people *can do* and what they *will do*' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 81; my italics). Talent and perseverance are two elements often cited by writers as critically bearing on success. One makes the 'can' possible; the other ensures it happens. The link between them, in Amabile's model, is task motivation, which 'is responsible for determining whether the creative process will begin at all and whether it will continue' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 81).

In particular, motivation is something directly implicated in achievement in an academic milieu. It drives students to enrol in topics and can dictate their performance, depending on the relationship they develop with teachers and the marks they receive. So along with personality, genetic, psychological and familial influences, broader educational ones, such as assessment paradigms, can be vital. First, the bad news. According to Amabile's research conducted with Hennessey, 'working for reward, under circumstances that are likely to occur naturally in classrooms and workplaces every day, can be damaging to both intrinsic motivation and creativity' (Hennessey & Amabile 1998, cited Dacey and Lennon 1998: 80). Now the good news. Some forms of 'extrinsic motivation can add to creative incentive, or at least not hamper it' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 80). What are these forms and can we incorporate them into the creative writing workshop? More to the point, will the institutional restrictions under which teachers perform allow them to design courses that can encourage or, at least, not hamper creativity? And even if teachers could, would they have the time and energy to conduct them?

I do not have space to answer all those questions here but a few points reveal the type of environment and activities that are beneficial. Some positive extrinsic motivations can be controlled by workshop teachers: 'Synergistic extrinsic motivators', which arise from the concept 'that the whole is more than the sum of its parts' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 80), relate to focusing not simply on individual exercises or assignments, the bits and pieces, but on broader aspects of education. For example, acknowledging competence and encouraging experimentation verbally is one way. Current researchers have built on Graham Wallas' 1926 analysis of 'the four-stage process of problem identification, preparation, response generation, and validation and

communication' of creativity, and note that at each stage progress can be acknowledged; that is, 'idea validation ... is a reward' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 80). Specialised workshops, talks by visiting experts and access to technical equipment are additional strategies for bolstering confidence and encouraging creativity.

On the more formal front, since in academia topics must be assessed and the ability to award Pass/Fail is often not an option (see Kroll 1997), marking a semester's work in part as a portfolio is an effective strategy. A portfolio demonstrates seriousness of effort and tracks skills' development rather than assesses the quality of individual pieces. I have been developing detailed requirements for this type of assignment for twenty years and find students in general put immense effort into all of the tasks it requires. The more options a teacher can devise for the expression of creativity within a framework, the more likely students will experience some validation of their skills. For example, a poetry student negotiated to review an ABC Radio *PoeticA* program rather than a printed collection (the set assignment), and to present his review in recorded form, since he already had broadcasting skills developed at a local station. In sum, a workshop leader needs to foster an atmosphere that communicates standards while it simultaneously encourages diversity. This is often a precarious balancing act, with students feeling that others might be 'better' than they are. What Amabile concluded supports children's creativity holds as well for university students. We must help them 'to keep rewards, competition, evaluation, and other constraints in perspective so that these factors do not overwhelm [their] intrinsic enjoyment of their work' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 84).

There is one final aspect of the workshop that needs to be explored: the master-apprentice dynamic. Students might conceptualise teachers at first as role models. They might have specifically chosen to study with them or, once introduced in an academic context, perceive them as mentors. As Dacey and Lennon explain:

> Mentor and apprentice relationships are particularly influential in young adulthood. Mentors not only recognise and encourage the creative achievements of young adults but also informally teach professional values, ethics, and work habits that become crucial aspects of the younger person's drive and productivity. (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 87)

The mentorship role, then, embodies personal and professional identities for writers in a university environment. They model complex behaviour because, being 'field representatives', they reveal not only outlets for creativity, but the perils and disappointments inherent in any artistic vocation. They wear both private and public faces.

The influence they exert on developing egos (and this applies to mature-age students as well) is complicated because they represent institutions, too, which insist that they must be assessors, controlling tasks and judging them. Being aware of the principles of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can help teacher-writers to negotiate this territory effectively. Perhaps they should all follow Ursula Le Guin's advice and post a sign on each side of the workshop door. The first will read: 'Do Not Feed the Ego!' The second will read: 'Do Not Feed the Altruist!' (Le Guin 2004: 252). The paradox is that

'the practice of any art is impeded by both egoism and altruism. What's needed is concentration on the work' (Le Guin 2004: 252).

To summarise, the workshop is a creative space established by a particular writer-teacher for agreed purposes. As the first sphere of influence students enter in academia, it can encourage or hamper creativity. Some conditions teachers can control from the outset; others they must monitor and modify: 'According to Lerner, not only are pupils affected by the way their classroom is arranged and by its atmosphere but the classroom in turn is affected by the types of students and the teacher in it' (Dacey and Lennon 1998: 245). More creative individuals will guarantee a livelier class. Less motivated and creative members ensure teachers have to plan more consciously to encourage creativity.

The writing generated can move beyond the exercises, critiques, annotations and reviews that might be required. It encompasses any writing done *for* that workshop audience, including writing inspired by membership in that group even if none of the others ever see it; in fact any writing generated that would not have been done if not for the workshop's existence. Further, it can look towards the future, encouraging creative production after the workshop itself has ceased to function. If habits of creative thought have been implanted, if notes and sources have been gathered, if patterns of composition have been established, then some individuals will continue to write for a lifetime, whether they become professionals or not, just as literature majors who establish a reading habit will continue to read and think about books, even if they do not become critics or academics. Teachers can, thus, help to instil the habit of creativity.

7 Conclusion: The Workshop Teacher as Nexus

How can teachers who are also writers function effectively in the workshop environment, continue to create and, further, act as researchers? Their position in the academy demands it. On the micro-level, they can utilise research in areas such as cognitive psychology, education, sociology and anthropology to understand better workshop dynamics and how to devise activities that foster skills' training plus stimulate creativity. They can be aware of the conflicting agendas of the workshop: to encourage, to provide domain-relevant knowledge and to assess. On a formal level, they can continue to research pedagogy to disseminate their knowledge.[2]

On the macro-level, I suggest that writers in academia continue to explore the proper subjects of the discipline as a whole, among them creativity and its processes. Development of this trend in Australia, the UK and the US has proceeded more systematically since the introduction of doctoral degrees in creative writing. The studio-model MFA did not demand either its teachers or students to pay close attention to creative writing as a discipline. The development of what Tim Mayers calls 'craft criticism' (Mayers 2005: xiv) in the United States is directly connected to writer-academics, and aims to liberate them from the craft-as-mere-technique cage restricting many workshop programs. Mayers talks about 'the scholarly analysis of creative production' (2005: 12), but, for him, its primary usefulness will be to construct 'a bridge between creative writing and composition studies' (xiv) in order to ease

tensions between them. The two disciplines, contributing concerns such as aesthetic theory and 'sociopolitical understandings of literacy' (Mayers 2005: xiv), would share a common subject area: 'writing (understood as the production of printed and electronic textual discourse)' (xiv).

This orientation derives from American systemic circumstances and does not directly address the issue of research paradigms, the need to supervise students who are undertaking writing Ph Ds, or the problem of defining practice-as-research. It also does not account for fictocritical or hybrid work that attempts to blur the boundaries between the act of creation and its criticism. Taken together, however, craft criticism in the US, the exegesis or critical dissertation in Australia and the UK[3] as well as criticism or theory by staff in all three regions demonstrate that they owe much to the foundations laid by their poet-critic or novelist-critic ancestors (Coleridge, Poe, Arnold, James, et al). This shared heritage provides an intellectual as well as artistic context for postgraduate work within a degree structure and for research to add to the stock of knowledge. Writers in academia are part of a beleaguered profession who perform more functions than the average academic does. They should exploit these multiple selves (see Kroll 2006b) and build on their shared agendas to advance the discipline as a whole. One of the structures that they share where they can begin to examine practices and assumptions is the workshop.

The workshop as a creative hothouse rather than a thousand-hectare farm offers a manageable space; within it teachers can cultivate creativity, technical and social skills, ethical awareness, cultural responsibility. They can experiment with new pedagogical strategies and come to a revitalised understanding of the nature of process. Eventually they can exploit their findings to achieve some of the outcomes required of them. Workshop activities occur in public, after all; its leaders are at once working within it and can stand back to observe (along with other researchers) on the other side of the glass. The more that they can demystify what they do, the more acute their perceptions of the nexus between practice and research will become.

If Paul Carter is correct, and 'creative knowledge cannot be abstracted from the loom that produced it' (Carter 2004: 1), then the workshop is a serviceable place to start a research profile. It foregrounds what writers do first and foremost: create. Since it engages its members in "doing" under the master's astute eye in a collaborative atmosphere, it can illuminate the complex reality of how works come to be. Conceiving of teachers and students as 'critical co-investigators' (Freire 1990: 56), therefore, to use Paulo Freire's term, might help us to develop innovative ways to research creative practice aside from those developed in the isolate artist's studio. In Freire's ideal of '*co-intentional* education ... Teachers and students ... co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge' (1990: 56). Finally, workshops can provide an impetus for writers to generate new creative work; they might participate in class exercises or be inspired by discussion, for example.

The culture of the workshop and the workshop in a particular culture interpenetrate, influencing the leader, the students, the institutional framework that supports them and the society from which both take their values. In the twenty-first century, therefore, the

workshop with mixed agendas must accommodate the increasingly diverse forms of texts, print and electronic, which now engage students and staff, by exploring appropriate 'creativity-relevant processes' and their implications. As a site for practice, research into practice and teaching practices, its modus operandi has to be flexible, ethical and local. To accomplish these goals it needs to eschew rigidity and be creative enough to move beyond the old patterns of workshopping. Its designers need to modify the conceptual universe it has inhabited for so long and make workshopping, just as writing is, an evolutionary and creative process.

Endnotes

1 The other traits are 'bidirectional causation, relative plasticity ... and diversity and individual differences in development' (245).

2. A recent book-length example of this type of study is *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project* (Leahy 2005), which proposes 'authority' as a pivotal concept that allows teachers to explore the principles operating in the classroom.

3. Today, 'writers on campuses in the United Kingdom continue to be defined by their awards and publications and, increasingly, also by recognized formal academic qualifications in creative writing' (Harper and Vanderslice 2005: 208). Nevertheless there, too, writers who want access to research funds have been forced to enter the debate about what constitutes creative arts research.

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