

**Room To Rhyme: Towards an Investigation of Intellectual Space in Creative Writing**

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In the days of the travelling bard, the bard would traditionally (in Ireland at least) begin his recitation by asking for 'Room to Rhyme' – sometimes this request was accompanied by the clearance of a space around himself using a hazel staff or similar implement. In so doing, he created a physical space where he could speak to his audience while also setting himself apart from them.

However, the request for 'Room to Rhyme' was more than just making a physical space or makeshift performance area – there were further implications – the bard was also creating an imaginative space where he could construct the world of his poems, and he was creating the conditions whereby these poems could be received by the listening audience through the establishment of a certain power relation and gaining acceptance of that relation. He was in effect establishing a social space where he could act 'as poet' and because of that social 'role' he had tacit or explicit permission and room to criticise, lampoon and act as social commentator in a way that would not normally be tolerated.

Once space has been constructed, it can be decoded or read. If that is true, then the process of constructing that space must be a signifying process (Lefebvre 1991). This raises a number of questions: who does the encoding? How is that encoding achieved? To what end is the encoding carried out? It also raises issues that tend towards the political, in terms of power relations and who controls the 'means' of production of such spaces.

In order to examine these questions more closely, we should look at the most common space we construct within Creative Writing pedagogy: the space of the workshop. The workshop normally takes place in a room supplied by, or hired on behalf of, the organisation or individual responsible for the workshop. In most cases,

within Higher Education at least, this means the University supplies the physical space and furnishes it with necessary equipment and certain consumables. Obviously it is important that the space is physically appropriate to the needs of the workshop it will hold, and provided this is so, the lecturer and the participants will meet weekly or bi-weekly in order to make use of this space and construct between them other types of spaces.

So what other spaces are necessary, and how are these called into being by the workshop? Firstly, there is intellectual space. The workshop exists in an intellectual space which is constructed by all of the participants. Each participant (lecturer or student) has an expectation of what the workshop is and how it will work. The actual workshop exists as an aggregate of all of these horizons of expectation. I take the idea of the horizon from Gadamer (1979) who asserted that understanding could be viewed as a negotiation between partners in a hermeneutical dialogue (270). Such understandings provided a common framework or 'horizon' through the 'fusion' of individual horizons which enables the formation of a new context of meaning integration and the assimilation of what is unfamiliar or strange (273). In other words, everyone's horizon must shift to a degree in order to form a single common 'horizon' which the group holds between them.

Where these horizons reinforce each other, participants have similar expectations and read the prevailing habitus with a similar interpretive strategy, thereby giving a workshop which is strongly realised and delineated in terms of the intellectual space that it occupies. Where such horizons of expectation interfere with each other, they produce divergent strategies for interpreting the space and as such it becomes unclear exactly what the intellectual space of the workshop is. Each participant may construct a different version of what they believe the space to be, but these will not be shared and may well come into direct conflict with others' constructions of the same space.

Fish, who followed Gadamer in using a similar theory directly related to how readers construct texts, is also useful here because the operation of what Fish (1976) refers to as interpretive communities can be directly related to the workshop. Fish asserted that interpretive communities which are underpinned by differing epistemologies can be expected to interpret a text differently. If one substitutes doxa for text, one is left with the notion that there may be interpretive communities operating with regard to the perceived rules of workshop, and this may well lead different communities to expect different things from the workshop. This can be exemplified in practice, by

comparing three sets of participants who arrive for the first workshop of their undergraduate degree from widely different backgrounds. Group A have no experience of workshop, have come from a school environment where the teacher imparts information and they take notes. Group B have been used to attending workshops where the workshop leader gives exercises for free writing and the outcomes are then read out and some positives are pointed up for further work. This 'ludic' type of workshop is sometimes used within Creative Writing in Higher Education, or it may form part of the critical workshop by engaging the participants in trigger exercises at the end of the critique session in order to stimulate new writing. We will be looking at this type of workshop in more detail later. Group C comes from a Further Education course where there is a critical workshop at which work in any genre may be circulated and where the workshop leader leads criticism on each piece and the students note what works and what doesn't. This is the more usual type of workshop in Higher Education and we will be looking at it in detail presently. Clearly these three backgrounds will engender three widely different interpretations of what the 'workshop' will actually be, and that will lead to three very different horizons of expectation (Jauss 1974). Koselleck (1985: 226-88) refers to the tension between the 'space of experience' and the 'horizon of expectation' as containing all social and political action. This must be so, since we base our expectations to a large degree on past experiences. Given the example of the three groups we have just discussed, each group will expect different 'actions' to take place within the workshop arena.

Of course, within Higher Education this tension is normally resolved by establishing a set of 'ground rules' and through the group leader outlining the expectations and requirements of the workshop in the initial meeting of the workshop, which then facilitate the development of doxa within the habitus so constructed. I take these terms from Bourdieu (1977) who defined habitus as 'a product of history' which 'produces individual and collective practices' and 'schemes of perspective, thought and action which tend to generate the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms' (54). This way of looking at Creative Writing is particularly apt since its evolution as a discipline has followed a historical set of rules where each generation of teachers replicated the techniques which were applied to them and the process of learning to teach Creative Writing has been described as happening by 'osmosis' (Ritter in *College English* Vol 64 No 2: 205). Doxa is defined as 'the relationship of immediate adherence that is established in practice between the habitus and the field to which it is attuned' (68)

and the term relates to the 'commitment to the presuppositions... of the game' (66). This is particularly important for level one BA students who may be entering extremely unfamiliar territory in the critical workshop. These doxa may also be implicit or already present within a group in which the participants already have prior experience of how the workshop is operated in the institution (for example level two or level three BA students) where the habitus is already well established.

The participants must be inducted into the prevailing habitus and be made familiar with the 'presuppositions of the game' in order to be able to develop a doxa – a feel for the game. This is a very important part of the process and will ensure that all of the participants have the same information from which to construct their horizons of expectation. This means that it is less likely that they will construct widely divergent ones and the workshop will have a much stronger idea of itself as workshop, and all concerned are aware of the prevailing habitus within the social space and the doxa required.

Once this has begun to be established, the workshop can get on with its critical or ludic business. Depending on the habitus that exists within the workshop, a variety of theoretical concerns become prevalent. Take for example the common requirement that the writer is silent during the discussion of their work. What actually happens in this situation is interesting. The writer enters into what Barthes (1977: 242) referred to as the 'death of the author' and through that doxa, they witness the birth of their fellow students as 'readers' who without recourse to the writer as 'authority' must now begin the dialogic process of interpretation of the text. This process is also decodable in terms of what Hirsch (1967) said regarding the 'babel of interpretations' and the intellectual space of the workshop at that point is filled by a number of these 'interpretations' as each student puts forwards the interpretation they have constructed through their dialogic relationship with the text. The space at this point is a dialogic space, since these interpretations enter into dialogue with each other in order to establish how the 'interpretive community' (Fish 1980) that is the workshop may view the text. Sometimes, several interpretive communities will arise where the group may disagree among themselves as to the interpretation which is 'correct'. At this point, perhaps, the workshop leader may begin a process of synthesising views and attempting to draw together 'horizons of expectation' related to the text and the various interpretations which therefore flow from that. This may not always be fully possible, but the synthetic attempt is usually helpful for both readers and writer.

In some cases, the writer may speak at that point, either in defence or acknowledgement of the criticism received. This defence may sometimes cause readers to change their original interpretation of the text and can be helpful, but the original interpretations still remain valid, since they are the likely interpretations the text may receive once it has been cut loose of its author through the act of dissemination. The value to the writer is that they have seen a sample of interpretations and can react to them through re-writing; or if they choose to stand by the original text at least they are more aware of the various readings which may arise.

As mentioned earlier, the other type of space which the workshop commonly encompasses is the 'ludic space'. This may be doubly defined as the space of the game itself and the space in which the game is played. With regard to the creative writing workshop if we examine the 'ludic space' created by the ubiquitous trigger exercise we can draw some interesting insights as to the role of the participants involved. In the trigger exercise the workshop leader offers an initial trigger which may be visual, textual, aural or an object which appeals to many senses, the leader may then provide some guidance as to what is expected – this may be minimal such as the instruction to write about that object for five minutes, or it may be more structured. This structure may take the form of direction such as asking the students to write a narrative poem about the object or suggestion: or a more detailed interrogative approach which encourages the student to ask questions by using instructions such as: 'as you handle the object think about who might have owned it, try and weave a story around it'.

What is actually happening is that something is being introduced to the participants which will require an imaginative response; a set of rules of the game are given, and the participants are asked to construct a new 'space' from their imaginative interaction with the object, according to the rules (or by bending or breaking them). This space is the space of the poem or story produced. It must exist in a separate 'intellectual space' separate from the workshop that produced it, because, using the rules of language, narrative and trope, the writer constructs the 'reality' of the text. If the game is the act of writing, then this is the space of the game itself. The workshop leader's function is to provide the framework for the writer to construct their own 'language game' which becomes the intellectual space which the writing occupies. The writer controls the game and actively encodes the space, and as such is in control of it at this point. The other 'ludic space' is the space in which the game is

played, and this may be thought of as the workshop, since it is within that intellectual space that each participant plays their own 'language game'. The workshop leader has outlined the 'rules' of the game and thereby facilitates the game initially, but the participants may choose to ignore the rules, or interpret them differently as they play the game.

What this means for us, as teachers of Creative Writing is that in order to get the best out of our teaching methodologies, and therefore out of our students, we need to be critically and theoretically aware of what it is we actually do at an intellectual level when we teach creative writing. This awareness itself adds another dimension to the knowledge that we transfer to our students, since we may well be able to point at a particular aspect of a workshop and analyse it in theoretical terms which are useful to the student. For instance, in a recent workshop I had two students who fundamentally disagreed about how a poem presented for workshop worked. There were two diametrically opposed viewpoints, both were coherently argued and 'valid' readings of the poem. The author was enacting Barthes. In order to clarify what just happened, I discussed Fish, Jauss and Gadamer, in order to show those theories 'in action'. The students left with a much clearer idea of the theories; they left with the knowledge that readers construct meaning differently; and they left with the knowledge that this can be used by the writer if they so desire. I could have said I think X is right and Y is wrong (as it happened, I did) but if I had done, I might have closed off one reading of the text for students, especially given the power relations inherent in undergraduate workshops where the workshop leader is often seen as final arbiter. By refusing to conform to that habitus, I opened up the workshop to much freer debate and offered room for disagreement and dialogue. The workshop space became subtly different, something had shifted, perhaps it was everyone's horizons of expectation.

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