

Decentring Everything: A Pedagogical Philosophy for Creative Writing.

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Abstract:

The following essay is in two parts. In the first I survey the available literature on the pedagogy of creative writing in order to elucidate the underlying philosophical and epistemological grounding of what has been written and in the second part of the essay I attempt to unpack my own epistemological beliefs. I have approached a variety of educational philosophers and others who are perhaps more widely relevant to all the humanities and attempted engagement with those creative writers who have looked at ontological and epistemological considerations of the subject in order to refine and define my own philosophical position within that debate.

Part 1

The reader may be struck by the rather non-academic meta-language that tends to be used by creative writers in writing about the academic side of their discipline. It is only right and proper, that we should talk among ourselves as writers as well as academics and theorists, and in so doing bring to bear the full range of tropes we use in our creative endeavours to get our point across. This speaks to our need to establish a parlance within the discipline which allows us to investigate theoretically aspects of creativity and the pedagogy of writing (and of creativity) from a writerly perspective and with a writer-centric orientation and to express those theories in metaphoric terms if need be. This may cause ongoing tensions between the 'academic' and 'creative' sides of the debate, but I think that these are to be welcomed and highlighted rather than ignored.

From the very beginning the pedagogy of creative writing has had a constructionist epistemology. This has been central to the epistemology behind creative writing since Emerson (qtd in Myers, 1996: 33) referred in his Phi Beta Kappa address of 1837 to the fact that 'there is then creative reading as well as creative writing'. Crotty (2003: 43) defines constructionism as the belief that 'meanings are constructed by human beings

as they engage with the world they are interpreting'. This is as good a way as any of describing what the creative writer does: that is they construct meaning from their engagement with the world they seek to interpret.

Myers (1996: 159) refers to Creative Writing as being a 'a discipline of constructive knowledge' and having a 'constructivist approach' by this he means examining how texts are constructed but it can be related directly to a constructionist epistemology since the same process of interpretation and making meaning is involved – it is still 'the elephants view of zoology' (Myers, 1996: 8).

In their 2005 article, *Creative Writing and an Overlooked Population*, Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet (2005: 126) describe the pedagogy of creative writing as 'that crazy aunt in the attic' and, as I survey the limited literature that has been written on the subject, I can't help agreeing with them. It is not so much that 'no-one wants to deal with her,' or that 'we just isolate her' as they assert, but that almost everyone who does seem to deal with her, deals with her exactly like a mad aunt, that is, they humour her, they justify her eccentricities and above all they shy away from examining the reasons why she might be mad in the first place. Indeed, Kelly Ritter (2001: 205) expressed her puzzlement at 'the lack of attention on the part of [her] university to the pedagogy of [the] field'. She goes on to describe how she felt as though learning how to teach creative writing was supposed to happen by osmosis.

Blythe and Sweet go on to separate the teaching of creative writing into six approaches. Although they treat them as if they are historically based, discreet, phases in the teaching of creative writing, all are still mooted as pedagogical philosophies today, and a number of other viewpoints in the literature can be directly related to them. The first of these, which they posit as a medieval model, is the Atelier Approach; this is a 'crafts based methodology wherein young artisans are apprenticed to master workers' (Blythe & Sweet, 2005: 120). This, one presumes, would be a fairly positivist approach to writing, and may be useful in the early stages to teach basic craft elements. There are many handbooks which assert that there are no rules for Creative Writing, but as Bulman's (2002) assertion that 'the very act of breaking a rule implies a knowledge of it' shows, much of the most original writing has been written in response to, or in rebellion against, perceived rules. However, almost all creative writing programmes operate on a

system where students are exposed to more than one mentor, in order that they get a number of different viewpoints as to what the 'rules' are.

The Great Works Approach, posits learning by imitation of great works of art. This is a fairly natural stage in the development of most writers where they are casting around trying to find their own style and therefore go through a phase of imitating their influences. Again, this is of use in order to get students to try out a variety of styles and to examine what they can learn from each.

The Inspiration Approach, is often used today by those workshops which insist that the 'writer's experience' is paramount and forms the backbone of what Micheline Wandor (2004: 122) refers to as 'the dominant twin determinants of current CW pedagogy...the search for the Muse and the aims of modern therapy'. Wandor is not alone in her questioning of the practice of allowing students to 'scribble whatever comes into your head for six minutes' (Wandor, 2004: 112). Steve Westbrook (2004:143) has also questioned this 'Just Do It' ideology and argues that we might as well 'ask Adrienne Rich to simply write poems and stop working towards feminist change or Umberto Eco to stop fussing with semiotics and history', yet we seem to teach creative writers to 'generate text for the purpose of simply generating text.' Where this Inspiration approach may be made to work is, if as Brooke (2004: 15) puts it, the tutor acts as 'a knowledgeable and experienced guide' and 'fellow traveller in the journey of education' who is 'willing to try *new paths of thought*' (ibid, 19). That is, where the philosophy is constructionist and relies on the student teacher relationship as a learning partnership, where the production of text is guided and drawn from the student by actively engaging and triggering their creative processes rather than merely leaving them with the instruction to produce. This approach is exemplified by what Richard Teleky (2001: 214) described as creative writing teachers acting as 'agents of transformation' who 'help students connect to silence as a place for thought and for the tensions that can produce art'.

The Techniques Approach 'emphasise[s] studying and learning specific methodologies [successful writers] employ' (Blythe & Sweet, 2005: 126) and is grounded in the student being able to replicate or adapt these techniques for their own use. There are many who advocate that approach today, indeed two of the assertions Siobhán Holland (2003: 4) makes in her 'Good Practice Guide' are that 'Creative Writing courses will require

[students] to read at least an amount equivalent to that required on Literary Studies courses' and 'Creative Writing is a critical discipline in its own right'. If both of those are sound, as I believe they are, then it implies that the criticism suggested includes criticism of the writer's technique.

The penultimate approach outlined by Blythe and Sweet is that of the Workshop Approach, this will be familiar to most creative writing programmes and it is by far the most used model. Wandor (2004: 122), outlines possible drawbacks of the approach when she says that 'the critical process...is hijacked to become part of the pedagogical procedure.' However, in defence of the Workshop Approach I would argue that the critical process exists after publication as a convention, not *as of right*, and there is no sound reason why any text cannot be criticised at any stage of the process. In fact, I feel that this is a natural part of the writer's process. The writer must look critically at what they have written prior to publication, to see if they are satisfied with the piece of work. It can also be very useful to have other opinions on the work, especially for the student writer, who has not fully developed either their writing or their critical abilities.

At its best, the workshop provides a constructive and egalitarian environment where the students and the teacher form a support network and a forum where new work gets valuable feedback and questions are raised about the work for the author to think about. Chris Green also has looked at another dimension in his article *Materializing the Sublime Reader*. In it he asserts that he wants 'to add another vocabulary to the pedagogy of the creative writing workshop: the language of use and action, of practice and implementation – praxis' (Green, 2001: 154). He asserts that 'most creative writing workshops today practice a radical pedagogy utilizing recursive, opportunistic instruction via decentralized authority' (158). This assertion may well be true of the more mature workshop but more often than not at undergraduate level the authority is far from decentralised, especially at level I. His view speaks to the scenario which operates only after much work has been done in giving the students the confidence to operate in a decentralised authority. At its worst the 'opportunistic' nature of the workshop can be prone to personality clashes, one-upmanship and knife wielding criticism. That being said, it is still the most used teaching model for creative writing and almost all of the case-studies and anecdotal literature surveyed were geared towards finding exercises and methods for making this model work or work better.

The last approach mentioned by Blythe and Sweet is the 'embryonic Feminist Approach' (2005: 120). They don't explain how this works but it may be considered part of a broader approach which seeks to use a variety of theoretical perspectives to inform the pedagogy of writing. Judith Harris employs a psychoanalytic approach which she sees as a point of cross fertilization with composition praxis and literary theory. She asserts that 'revision is not only a writing process, it is also a psychological process' (Harris, 2001: 183). That is certainly true, and it may further be asserted that it is also a political and gendered process since rewriting may involve censorship and the working up of material to make a political point or to point up a gendered subject. She cites Moxley and Bishop as two further supporters of this cross-fertilization between the disciplines.

Much of the literature so far written on creative writing pedagogy has been written from the rather defensive point of view of investigating if creative writing can be taught and showing that it can. This is, in one sense, only to be expected, since about a hundred years ago, English Literature was doing much the same thing. A representative list of articles which deal with the justification of Creative Writing as an academic subject can be found in the bibliography, but the following example may stand for the many: in 2003 Steve May completed and published a mini project for the Higher Education Academy which was entitled *Teaching Creative Writing at Undergraduate Level: Why, how and does it work?* – The title itself implies that the question has already been answered at graduate level (as one might expect that it would have been after years of producing MA graduates).

This begs the question as to whether the last question in his title is in some sense a 'non-question' since teaching creative writing at undergraduate level must work to some extent because we have been doing it with some success since 1990. It also depends very much against what criteria one measures the courses. If we set the standard in such a way that we examine the number of published writers we produce, we will get a much different impression of our relative success than if we use the number of our graduates who find employment or go on to higher degrees. May covers the teaching provision at eight institutions, interviews staff and students and concludes that skills are being taught which produce 'Graduates...well qualified to find employment as.... skilled

writers, communicators and editors' and possessed of skills that are transferable to 'many other fields' (May, 2003: 79).

Still more articles are written from the point of view of either the pragmatic consideration of those exercises which, in the tutors experience, work for them and/or for their students or case studies of various workshops which may be held up as examples of good practice. Both of these are necessary and both are illuminating and an excellent resource for creative writing teachers engaged in the practical day-to-day struggle of trying to find new and inspiring models and methodologies to take into the seminar room or workshop. Again a representative list of those articles consulted in researching this essay is presented in the bibliography but suffice it to say that they vary from anecdotal evidence to those structured as case studies; although Light (2002b) does use his case study to suggest 'a critical shift...from a subjectivist to a dialogic perspective'. Some, such as Freeman (2002) however, seem to agree that 'intellectuality is not an essential part of creative writing'. Perhaps Jeri Kroll's comment that 'the battle has shifted to justify their existence on a theoretical basis' (Kroll, 2004: 97) shows that creative writing teachers have realised that, as Vandenburg (2004: 7) says, 'owing to its own historical movement away from a scholarly discourse [creative writing] has been ripe territory for annexation'. Clearly, the implied threat is that unless we can approach 'the mad auntie' ourselves, Literary Studies or Rhetoric and Composition (Vandenburg's own discipline) are quite prepared to do it for us.

Of those who have dealt with more philosophical and overarching pedagogical questions in Creative Writing, Paul Dawson's work in *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* is the most comprehensive. Dawson (2005) starts off on predictable enough ground asking '*can writing be taught?*' (7) He answers this with the assertion that just because the student is taught the principles of how a scientific theory (or presumably a great work of literature) was produced does not mean that the student will be capable of producing one themselves. The implication is that you can teach the craft of writing, but not the inherent originality of the best writers. This is a position most of those who have written on the subject would agree with. He makes a case for what he calls a 'theoretically informed pedagogy' (161) and divides this into three basic models: the integration model, the avant-garde model and the political model.

The integration model is 'based on the assumption that there is a fundamental conflict between writers and critics' and sees the workshop as 'a dialogue between the two.' This model, he asserts 'seems especially prominent in the UK' (161). It is a model which aims to use theory in order to inform the teaching of writing. It also examines ways of using creative writing to teach theory. For example, one might look at how 'Barthes's theory of the author entering his own death at the moment of writing enables students to understand how writers assume a narrative persona' while it also recognises that 'discussions of craft, as a series of technical decisions, recentres the authorial subject, supposedly questioning theory'(163). This model works on the premise that there is mutual interrogation and engagement between the discussion of craft and theory.

The avant-garde model operates on the principle that 'the ultimate goal is not to illuminate Theory through practice, but to remake it' and this, Dawson warns, 'can lead to the neo-confessional workshop poem and minimalist fiction being replaced as ideal modes of writing with 'experimental' writing, and to a poetics which cannot accommodate students who wish to write 'conservative' genres' (166). However, when properly operated, Dawson believes this model can also lead to the collapsing of the boundaries of literature and criticism in such a way that Barthes, Derrida etc now become the writers who are read and criticised.

The political model, within which Blythe and Sweet's Feminist approach may presumably be situated, posits the writer as 'representative of a constituency' (174) and focuses 'on the social conditions in which creative works are made' (173) just as much as on the mechanics or aesthetics of them. Dawson warns that this might disintegrate into a rather crude dependence on ethnicity merely replacing 'grandpa on the hill' with 'my yiddish mamma on hester street' (175) but that at best it can 'empower individual students' and add to 'the critical pedagogy tradition of socially conscious activism' (177). Dawson's philosophy appears to favour 'a dialogic process, a ceaseless interaction between permeable modes of writing' (178) and there is a sense that 'creative writing might now need to situate itself in relation to a new academic paradigm' (180). What he appears to be suggesting as the new academic paradigm is made up of a 'more socially engaged and intellectually aware pedagogy' (214) facilitated by the removal of the hierarchical relationship between the making of literature and its criticism. In advocating this he draws on Bakhtin's dialogic theories and theory of heteroglossia. He is asking for

a decentring process which will deconstruct those old oppositions and reconstruct a new integrated dialogic way of looking at the discipline which is not 'restricted to commentary upon craft as an abstract technique and an approach to writing as an individual practice removed from society'. He advocates 'employing oppositional criticism precisely to interrogate the assumptions about literature underpinning...responses and then to consider how the work in question differs from and interrelates with a range of non-literary (scholarly, political, journalistic, legal) discourses of gendered power relations' (206) and 'an awareness of the political effects of aesthetic decisions' (207). His basic tenets appear to stem from the belief that literature, reality, and the writer themselves are constructed through the dialogic processes inherent in language and the dialogues and oppositions between society and the individual and what are perceived to be objective truth, social construct and subjective viewpoint.

Graeme Harper (1997) has outlined the concept of 'Gramography', which he defines as the process of 'writing about writing' and which is intended to be creative writing's 'own discourse with which it can develop, define and debate its epistemology.' This discourse is supported by a 'methodological ground-base' called 'structuralism' which 'provides a method of understanding the relationship between structure and social agency'. This is tied to the constructionist epistemology by Piaget's dictum that 'there is no structure apart from construction' quoted by Harper in his article.

Harper defines creative writing's philosophical grounding as based on a Cartesian system of doubts which 'can be canonical...communicative...aesthetic.... linguistic...and cognitive.' He argues that 'in each case doubt can be taken to be not a destructive device working against Creative Writing pedagogy but a constructive ethos working toward and with the building of a unique and enfranchising pedagogic system'. The basis of this system, is a type of thinking which he describes as 'rhizomatic' based on the metaphor of the rhizome which is a 'creeping, branching stem lying beneath the surface of the soil' which 'does not depend on contradiction and hierarchy, and therefore encourages multiplicity, notably one of the fundamentals of creative and divergent thinking' (all quotes from online article without page numbers).

It might also be pointed out that rhizomes act invisibly beneath the surface and burst out periodically in order to aid the parent fungus to colonise new areas. The area they

operate in, just under the soil, is invisibly pervaded and occupied by them. This is a system which might just as easily be taken as a metaphor for the creative process itself, with the work brewing below the surface making unseen subconscious connections before bursting out into what Stephen Spender described as a 'shower of words' (qtd in Ghiselin, 1952:119) but might be more aptly described here as Hewitt's (1981: 35) 'Green Shoot.'

Two main approaches inform Harper's thinking, the first of which he quotes from Bergson asserts 'past acts and perceptions, whether formally taught or discovered independently, are the basis on which new acts and perceptions are made and also form habits capable of repetition' (1997, not paginated). In an article on a similar subject, Harper quoted Derrida as having 'noted that every pedagogical exposition, just like every reading, adds something to what it transmits' (Harper, 2000, not paginated). This could be further extended to mean that every act of writing a writer undertakes also adds something to what it transmits to that writer's development. This would imply that the act of writing and rewriting are processes which aesthetically and artistically inform all subsequent acts of writing and rewriting that the writer undertakes and the interaction of these repeated engagements are responsible for the evolution of what might be called the authors distinctive style or voice. Thus at 'each developmental level, an extended period of skill acquisition takes place' (Harper, 1997, not paginated).

This may be integrated with the second of the two influencing approaches, that of Fischer, Harri-Augstein and Thomas, whose model Harper says 'encourages the evolution of action-based and abstract reasoning skills, their ongoing transformation, their revision, their intercoordination and substitution...this is also the closest pedagogic schema to an exemplification of drafting.' This consideration of how the theoretical model integrates with the practice adds credence to Harper's assertion that 'Grammography is learner conscious' and that 'the structurationalist paradigm is synthetic and eclectic and can be used to consider the ways in which any action is composed of capability and knowledgeability' (quoted from unpaginated online article, 1997).

These two standpoints are both informed by a constructionist epistemology, Dawson's approach might be described as dialogic. Harper's might equally be termed synthetic

since he seeks to synthesise the craft and theoretical elements into a pedagogic model which will allow the writer to connect many discourses in a rhizomatic fashion and feed off them all in order to fuel fresh bursts of creativity. Both believe that the purpose of pedagogy in creative writing is to facilitate the writer's construction of the text, and also to facilitate the writer's construction of himself as a writer within the larger social milieu. In this they are joined by Kroll (2004) who sees 'the interconnectedness between different methodologies as a kind of intertextuality' and advocates the writing 'thesis as a polyphonic discourse' (93). Kroll 'realised that we were both constructing and learning about our discipline simultaneously' (90). Part of this construction process is also to interrogate from a writerly perspective how that social milieu is constructed. Where Kroll, Dawson and Harper differ, in essence, is how this interrogation is carried out. Dawson sees it as a dialogue between creative writer and language or creative writer and social construct. Harper tends to see the creative writer as garnering the strands of social reality and examining them through the process of weaving together various narratives. Kroll advocates 'a theory of praxis' (92). She seems to see this praxis in a transformative sense which utilises the fact that everything consists in text and follows Scholes whom she quotes as saying, 'in *reading* we produce text *within* text; in *interpretation* we produce text *upon* text; and in *criticizing* we produce text *against* text' (99). All are useful ways of looking at what the function of the creative writer, the reader and the critic are, and by extension, all three approaches examine how we should be teaching creative writing. All three are nevertheless capable of synthesis, since they find common ground in the constructionist belief that meaning is a linguistic construct and that all reality exists as text.

Part 2

In outlining my own philosophical position, allow me to start with an assertion: texts are constructed in much the same way as reality is constructed. They are constructed from language. Language is 'the web to whose threads subjects cling and through which they develop into subjects in the first place' (Habermas, 1988: 117). Perhaps this is why 'fiction' can seem so 'real' to us, why when we enter a text as readers we are able to construct a three dimensional world in our imagination from the linear list of characters printed on the page. Or perhaps I should say reconstruct, since the world will have first been constructed by its author, who, by placing the linear list of characters on the page, has set a formula for that particular world to be reconstructed by the reader, at least

within limits. The limits here are that while no two people will construct exactly identical worlds from the textual code, it can be broadly depended upon that they will not construct radically different worlds, at least in the sense that of those people reading the same futuristic science fiction novel, it is most unlikely that one of them will construct from the text an imaginative world akin to Jurassic Park.

Reality is constructed in much the same way. We interpret the world as a text, in that we construct our ideas from language and decode that text into our own perception of what reality consists in. At base, we agree on most things which are 'real' – that is we all decode the text within the same broad interpretive limits, but the world that we construct for ourselves varies slightly from individual to individual. As Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) put it: 'the relationship between concept and object, and between signifier and signified, is never stable' (1994: 139). This is a natural result of the slipperiness of language, the fact that the signifier and the signified never quite lock into place; the fact that the sign and the referent are never unified. This allows meaning to 'flicker' and as Conrad (1994: 8) put it, 'we live in the flicker'. In one sense we all live in that flicker since it is within that flickering language that we each construct our realities. In another sense though, it is this 'flicker' of meanings that allows the creative writer to ply their trade. The creative writer must 'live on' as well as 'in' it, since it is through exploiting these flickers of language in rhetorical tropes and imagery that all creative writers make their living.

Sadler (1969: 14-16) has said that 'the classical distinction between subject and object, between consciousness and thing, between interpretation of the mind and objective facts has broken down...Experience is completely a mixture of subjective and objective, of fact and interpretation, of consciousness and thing.' In effect the world exists as a construct of language, the rules of interpretation exist before we do. We are, then, ourselves products of this system in a Marxist sense, which begs the question who controls the means of production. The logical conclusion is that if you can master and control language, you are automatically empowered. This may well be the basis of Friere's (1972: 28) understanding of Praxis: 'reflection and action on the world in order to transform it'. That is precisely what the writer tries to do, he attempts to control language; control the means of production and thereby influence the reality that the

reader experiences. The writer reflects on and acts on the reader's world (which is also, of course, constructed by language) through the world of the text in order to transform it.

The text of a reality constructed on a flat earth and geocentric universe belief reads differently to the text of a reality constructed on the belief in a heliocentric universe and a spherical earth. To analyse how, let's look at the 'phenomenon' of 'sunrise'. Under the first system the 'text' of this phenomenon is interpreted as the sun moving above the horizon from under the earth. In the second system the same 'text' is interpreted as the a point on the earth turning towards the sun due to the movement on the earth on its axis. Further, now that we realise that our universe is not actually heliocentric (at least our sun is not at the centre of it) and that we are in actual fact orbiting a fairly minor star on a far flung arm of a galaxy which along with millions of others are scattered around an uncertain centre, our reality is further 'decentred' and the text of that 'decentred reality' is different again from the other two.

Rorty (1985: 217) refers to 'the moral self...constantly reweaving itself...in the hit or miss way in which cells readjust themselves to meet the pressures of the environment' – writing has always done this. The over all effect of writers experimenting and pushing boundaries in all directions is to create movements, much in the way of the 'Biased Random Walk' (McNab & Koshland 1972) theory in Maths or Biology. This theory shows that a colony of bacteria, where each individual bacterium moves randomly, will tend to go in one specific direction more than the others because they are influenced positively or negatively by a chemical gradient such as proximity of food or poison. The mass movement is made up of an aggregate of all the random movements of each individual bacterium when acted upon by the gradient. Both Rorty's moral self and the writer's development appear to show analogous developmental qualities and I feel that critical readings of texts and constructions of the self and reality work similarly. They are all subject to polyphonic forces which operate in many directions but are synthesised by a writer's or reader's 'gradient' into a coherent directional development. These too are constantly being re-examined as each new interpretive community brings its horizon of understanding to bear upon them, so that paradigm shifts are not entirely random events but occur over years as small shifts in understanding add layer upon layer building up pressures on the paradigm until it must decentre itself and shift, rather like an earthquake, to relieve these pressures.

I agree with Dawson (2005: 210) in his assertion that 'language is fundamentally heteroglot, and each of its internally stratified elements embodies the belief system and world view of its users.... literature is, in essence, a conscious artistic dramatisation of this dialogic clashing of living discourses in society...writers represent within the literary work a range of extra-literary languages which organise social relations' and it is certainly true that 'every word contains simultaneously both the author's (literary) language and the language of social groups' (211). I agree also with Dawson's assertion that '*reading as a writer* involves a formalist analysis of how a literary work is constructed by paying attention to the conscious decisions an author has made regarding plot, structure, point of view, narrative voice, character, dialogue etc...craft must therefore be conceived as a conscious and deliberate intervention in the social life of a discourse as well as a series of aesthetic decisions regarding the artistic quality of a work' (211). This must enter into a dialogic relationship with the critical reading performed by the writer in order to create and explore the tensions the writer has introduced into the text. It is, of course, equally applicable to the critic, who will create their own tensions between the text and their reading of it.

In order to use language originally, the writer must decentre it, decentre their perception of the norms of language, and to some extent decentre their perceptions of reality, since they must construct a separate reality in their texts, either by assuming a persona or in creating a 'fictional reality'. The same is true of teaching creative writing. The pedagogy of creative writing consists mainly in facilitating the student to decentre their perceptions of language (making it new) and enabling them to construct alternate realities in their writings (making it real). The two major pedagogical tools in creative writing are the trigger exercise and the critical workshop. These two tools deal with the two major parts of the creative process if one might be allowed to split it so grossly; inspiration and crafting.

The critical workshop has been a mainstay of creative writing pedagogy since the Iowa model was adopted and adapted by everyone else. The idea is that creative work is tabled and discussed, interrogated and constructively criticised. Suggestions for improvement are made, good points are highlighted. Dewey (1897: 77) said that 'through the response which is made to the child's instinctive babblings the child comes

to know what those babblings mean; they are transformed into articulate language' if one were to replace the word 'child' here with 'writer' one gets an insight into what the workshop process does to the 'raw apprentice writer'.

The child is initiated into language and 'taught to speak' by an adult basically pointing at 'daddy' and saying 'dada' when the child makes the 'da' sound and pointing at 'mummy' and repeating 'mama' when the baby says 'ma' and pointing at the baby and repeating 'baba' when the baby makes the 'ba' sound. This teaches the child that those syllables 'mean'; they are signs with an identifiable referent and as such can be used in the absence of the referent. Other syllables, 'ga' or 'ca' for instance, are not initially pointed up and so the child realises that they do not 'mean'. This is the beginning of the child's initiation into the system of language, a pre-existing system which must be 'taught' to the child in order for the child to participate in it and construct its own reality.

Likewise, when the student writer produces a good image, or a strong piece of description or characterisation, the workshop points these up. These are encouraged. Weak writing, such as cliché or the over-use of abstraction, is likewise pointed up and discouraged. This very simple example shows how the writer begins to be initiated into another system. It is still the system of language, but it is a specialised arm of it, a system of heightened language, a system of creative writing. This too is pre-existing and this too must be taught. The processes are not dissimilar. Both depend on positive or negative reinforcement, both involve a 'mentor' experienced or expert in the system, both involve a learning process not unlike a 'biased random walk' where, as the initiate progresses up the degrees of expertise they do so by having 'constraints' put upon them which guide their learning: 'mama' means; 'googoo' doesn't – 'iron air biting' is interesting 'red as a rose' is a cliché.

The workshop environment may be defined in Habermas' (1990: 65) terms as a place where the participants 'critically examine a hypothetical claim to validity' for a piece of writing. Among the workshop group is generated a set of values which must be unpacked if the criticism which the group engages in can be used to maximum effect. These values will be an amalgam of the influences, tastes and artistic preferences of each of the participants and will in effect form and inform the 'lifeworld' of the group. As Habermas (1990: 135) says, 'the shared lifeworld offers a storehouse of unquestioned

cultural givens' which it is the writer's job to examine and interrogate. The workshop facilitates this decentring process, since it attempts to teach writers not only craft, but critical distance and the ability to analyse and differentiate the objective, the socially constructed and the subjective viewpoints.

In *S/Z* Barthes (1990: 4) writes: 'Our literature is characterised by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and customer, between its author and reader.' The creative writing workshop serves to decentre and even deconstruct this opposition. It recognises that the writer is also the first reader of any text. It recognises that the skills of the writer and the skills of the reader are both necessary in each participant and it recognises that the best writing is generated when these skills are brought to bear in an integrated and coherent manner. This means more than the often quoted cliché that the best writers are the best readers; this is about applying the ability to read from the inside *and* from the outside simultaneously. The creative writer needs to read the text both as writer and as reader/critic and to be able to identify and analyse the tensions that exist between those two interpretations so that the whole may in some sense be reconciled to make up a coherent work of art. In effect, he must decentre himself and deconstruct the oppositional forces of writer and critic within himself in order to produce a reconstructed and decentred artistic self which is capable of reconciling both roles, examine the socially constructed and subjective elements and identify what is truly objective within the work in a way which will benefit the writing.

Ideally the mature workshop, especially at MA level should constitute a place where tutor and students act as 'equally knowing subjects' (Frieze, 1972: 31) and interact in a 'dialogical' (81) manner. In practice, particularly when one considers the power relations involved, it is likely that the first of these conditions will not be met, since the tutor will, generally, be perceived by the students as being more knowing than them. However, at this level the tutor can make clear that what is being offered is advice and opinion rather than prescriptive feedback, and that the students are at liberty to disagree with and discuss the tutors point of view as they would any other point of view offered (from the peer group for example). In this way we can set about equalising the participants as knowing subjects, even if the inherent power relationship of mentor – student is never fully eradicated. The fact that all opinions and viewpoints are open to interrogation and

discussion renders to the group a 'dialogic' and 'synthetic' quality since it is likely that a wide variety of viewpoints will be opened up and the student writer will synthesise them into a useful critique on his or her work.

Heaney is quoted by Brown as having said that poetry is 'a completely successful love act between the craft and the gift' (Brown qtd in Bloom, 1986:34). This means that there are two parts to successful writing, the mechanics or craft, which can be taught; and the gift, here referring to the Irish word *dán* which means both poem and gift in both the sense of talent and present. The craft is taught in workshop and seminar, the gift cannot be taught, but one can study the creative process in order to help the gift happen. One can ascertain under what conditions the gift or inspiration is likely to occur and set about replicating them. This is the purpose of most trigger exercises.

I liken the creative process to a cloud chamber. In the cloud-chamber atoms of ideas are flying around and bumping into each other, once in a while these idea atoms combine to form something stable, that is the start of the poem, the inspiration. In science, in order to make the cloud-chamber more productive, one would raise the temperature or the pressure to make the atoms move faster, bump into each other more often and so make more combinations, and by the law of averages, more stable combinations. In effect, one destabilises and decentres the system. This decentrifcation introduces an increased randomness into the system, thereby allowing it to produce unusual or unfamiliar results. It is the same with writing. Writers find ways of increasing the frequency of ideas by using triggers, which they know through long years' experience, work for them. As creative writing teachers, we attempt to introduce as many of these triggers as possible to our students in order to help them decentre their creative processes and make them more productive.

The overall epistemology that I am advocating is one where the writer is facilitated to construct themselves as a writer and to decentre their perceptions of the world through their experimentations and interactions with language in order to reinterpret and reinvent the text of reality in new ways for the purposes of creating original writings. Each writer engages with the feedback provided in a manner which is aware of the social and political power relations, that inform the critique and is enabled to measure these against

their own perceptions of objective, social and subjective reality in order to decide on their usefulness and relevance to their own work.

In foregrounding these concerns within practical methodologies, I hope to encourage active engagement among students and tutors with epistemological paradigms and thereby, promote a more holistic view of the pedagogy of the discipline. Actual strategies employed in the delivery of this to the students will vary, and will no doubt form the basis of a number of future papers (from myself and others). The strategies will however rely largely on student-centred methodologies which empower the student as the active agent of their own learning and the tutor as facilitator, mentor and guide in that learning. I think they must also empower the student to analyse the processes of their own learning (and their own creativity), either formally or informally in order to find strategies and methodologies best suited to them as individuals. Of course, this itself is only one epistemology which can be added to the polyphonic babble of epistemologies that creative writing pedagogy is in the process of generating, it will be up to others to decide if it 'means' or doesn't.

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