

## Poets on Pedagogy

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### **Abstract:**

This research article presents a qualitative interview analysis of the creative writing pedagogy of five successful, practicing poets. After a review of the literature and theoretical framework, the findings of this study are presented within the categories of *You can teach technique but can only encourage the rest*, *Accelerants as effective teaching*, *Teaching writers to use "inventiveness"*, and *Talk about poetry: Metacognition*. A final section of this paper speaks to the implications of the pedagogy offered by the interviewed poets; implications that are both immediately useful to classroom practice (i.e., they present various avenues of thought which enrich practice) and speculative (i.e., these implications name areas and pose questions where future work can provide greater insights).

### **Introduction**

This study presents the findings from a qualitative interview analysis of five successful and practicing poets: Stuart Dybek, Elizabeth Kerlikowske, William Olsen, Diane Seuss, and Diane Wakoski (see appendix for abbreviated bibliographies). The purpose of these qualitative interviews is to discern what these poets believe about pedagogy. Each of these five poets has been teaching poetry at various levels for over two decades. I will first review the relevant literature to contextualize and communicate my theoretical framework. A discussion of the methods and methodological positions adopted follows, along with a review of the categories culled from the data—categories based on an analysis of what these poets tell us about their pedagogical approaches and practices. Finally, I offer implications for writing pedagogy.

I want to take a moment to speak to my envisioned audience for this article. This article is written for the teacher of writing and future teacher of writing who sees creative writing instruction as being indispensable to such an undertaking. I believe that viewing critically the teaching pedagogy of poets not only increases our awareness of teaching creative writing, but writing broadly defined. I do not believe that creative writing pedagogy has been given enough consideration within what I will refer to as writing studies—the various fields of study which consider the teaching of writing to fall within their purview. This article is a call for integrating creative writing pedagogy into courses across writing studies. In my own experience, I draw on creative writing pedagogy when

teaching beginning and advanced composition courses as well as English education courses.

### **Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature**

The guiding theoretical assertion of this study is that poets are a rich and often untapped resource for extending our understanding of pedagogy. Such a theoretical position champions an interdisciplinary approach, in fact, I see no other way to approximate toward a greater understanding of writing pedagogy than to pool disciplinary resources for the simple fact that language and literacy have always been and will remain dynamic, unregulated, undisciplined endeavors and this serves as a source of great possibility and energy.

What literature utilizes the knowledge and experience of poets to inform language and literacy pedagogy? There are two broad fronts to explore this question: (1) Scholars who have sought out poets to inform their understanding of pedagogy and (2) Poets who have written about their own practice and pedagogy. This study belongs to the former category and as such belongs to the category where less research has been conducted.

Foundational to my own development has been the work of Wendy Bishop and Patrick Bizzaro. Wendy Bishop was the trailblazer in this arena of coordinating the line between what creative writers do when they write and writing pedagogy until her untimely death in 2003. Her work often sounds like a rallying-cry for the type of study offered herein. In *Teaching Lives* Bishop argues that “we need to be crossing the line between composition and creative writing far more often than we do. In fact, we may want to eliminate the line entirely” (221). One of her guiding principles, and one this study shares, is that “writing in each genre [is] more similar to writing in other genres than it is different from them” (230). This is an important corollary to make, and it’s one that doesn’t get made very often, I suspect, as a result of disciplinary orientations and the resulting disparate institutional positions of creative writing and academic writing. Finally, in a direct call for the type of study offered herein, Bishop argues that “...in our classroom, the results of writing research should be welcome beside the testimonial of expert (and/or famous) writers” (234).

Patrick Bizzaro, who still considers Wendy Bishop a mentor, has made similar claims (Bizzaro has an edited collection of essays honoring the work of Wendy Bishop forthcoming from Hampton Press titled *Composing Ourselves as Writer-Teacher-Writers*). In a recent essay published in *College English*, Bizzaro reissues this claim: “One of [Bishop’s] most important contributions, a task that no one had previously undertaken, was to argue for the interconnectedness of creative writing and composition studies. By doing so, Bishop insisted on the importance of studying what writers do when they write” (258). Bizzaro goes on to issue a call for a new line of inquiry within writing studies: “Bishop’s view of the profession may very well serve as a call for the development of new research methods in English studies, methods that find a way to study the writer at work, in developing pedagogies of writing [...]” (266). This call to theorize using the actual experiences of successful writers at work is taken up by Mike Harris in his article *Are Writers Really There*. Harris underlines the point that creative writing theory must be constructed based on what creative writers have to tell us about their writing process: “Listen to writers and the beginning of an answer is forthcoming: it gets there in composition, through the agency and efforts of the poet, novelist and script writer” (44).

Another author whose research has influenced my own is Nancy Bunge. Bunge’s collection of interviews, *Finding the Words*, takes a similar epistemological and methodological approach to the interviews offered herein. Bunge’s collection of interviews focuses on writers who teach. The similarities to my own work are that she is interviewing writers who came to teaching second; their first concern is their own writing. Of fundamental importance is also the work of Don Murray who was also one of the pioneers in making explicit the connections between actual strategies employed by writers and pedagogical practice. As an example, Murray’s *A Writer Teaches Writing* focuses on providing “English teachers an effective method of teaching composition based on the experience of professional writers” (xi).

Of contemporary importance to my research has been Tim Mayer’s *(Re) Writing Craft* in which a central argument is that language and literacy pedagogy must make a turn toward equalizing the attention given to reading and writing. Traditionally and currently, he argues, English departments have privileged textual consumption over textual production. One of the ways to even the scales is to look toward creative writers and

mine their craft for what it may offer other disciplines focused on language and literacy. Mayers writes, “The writing of poetry and fiction, for example, rather than being cordoned off within creative writing courses, might be integrated into all or most of the courses offered in English” (153). The study I present herein tries answer this call by analyzing what poets have to say about their pedagogy and subsequently introducing their theoretical and practical claims to language and literacy pedagogy.

Finally, there are classifications of works that have helped ground my understanding of this study that I would like to make mention of, albeit brief. Creativity studies within the field of psychology have been particularly useful in helping me to analyze these interviews with poets. Rollo May’s *The Courage to Create*, Howard Gardner’s *Creating Minds* and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s *Flow* and *Creativity* are works focusing on the creative habits of successful people that set a high standard for this work of constructing categories drawn from in-depth analyses of people’s working habits. Another classification of works that have been guideposts I call the historians. These are works that have mapped fields of study; such mapping takes on greater significance when working across recognized disciplinary boundaries. Stephen North’s *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, D.G. Myers’ *The Elephants Teach*, James Berlin’s *Rhetoric and Reality*, Arthur Applebee’s *Tradition and Reform*, Sharon Crowley’s *Composition in the University*, and Louise Wetherbee Phelps’ *Composition as a Human Science* are examples of works that have helped to not only carve out disciplinary landscapes but have also catalyzed the transfer of theory, practice, and pedagogy amongst the various disciplines concerned with writing studies. Finally, there is the classification of texts that I call “writers on writing.” These books are generally produced and read within the field of creative writing. There are far too many to provide any sort of in-depth analysis but I would like to list a few that have been important to my work in terms of helping me to complicate and extend my understanding of creative writing processes:

*Conversations with Ernest Hemingway*, Mathew Brucoli, ed.

*The Art of Fiction*, Ayn Rand

*Real Sofistikashun*, Tony Hoagland

*On Writing*, Stephen King

*Burning Down the House*, Charles Baxter

*The Faith of a Writer*, Joyce Carol Oates

*Writers on Writing*, Robert Pack and Jay Parini, eds.

*The Eleventh Draft*, Frank Conroy, ed.

*On Becoming a Novelist*, John Gardner

*The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner

*On Writers and Writing*, John Gardner

*Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino

*Writing as a Way of Healing*, Louise DeSalvo

The main difference between these works and the study offered herein are that these works focus on writers speaking to other writers about the craft of writing and the process of becoming a writer. My study takes a decidedly different tack, focusing instead on pulling out of the interviews with poets aspects of pedagogy that are transferable to the creative writing classroom, composition classroom, and English education classroom. Also, the above list of works are autobiographical for the most part and focus therefore on a single writer's set of beliefs. I believe that my analysis of these five poets offers a more comprehensive, convergent, and, ultimately, accurate portrait of pedagogy for writing teachers.

### **Methods & Methodology**

My methodological stance views these interviews as co-constructions. While my research interests begin and frame these conversations, it is the participants who construct the responses which become the basis of the research. As a result, the relationship between the researcher and the participant is symbiotic as opposed to interviews that fashion themselves more closely to a survey method or formalized questionnaire. The relationship between disciplinary frames of reference must also work in concert if the topic of writing pedagogy is to be clearly communicated and further developed.

Another aspect of my methodological stance—and one that I believe borrows from several fields within writing studies—has to do with my epistemological approach. It is my belief that these interviews offer complexity rather than control, nuanced understanding rather than comprehensive explanation. Furthermore, rather than assuming a myopic disciplinary stance, I believe an interdisciplinary stance—a stance fore-grounded by scholars such as Patrick Bizzaro and Wendy Bishop—is the generative methodological stance that invigorates this study.

I adopt a qualitative interview method (see Denizen and Lincoln, 2003; deMarrais and Lapan 2004; Clandinin, 2007; Kvale, 1996; Weiss 1994) for several reasons. An interview method is more accurate than self reports because of the involvement of the researcher (for example, in an interview I can use tools such as restatement or summary to ensure mutual understanding). An interview method also avoids the problems inherent in forcing participants out of their natural and familiar context as writers; methodological problems that an experimentalist design or protocol analysis approach must contend with, for example.

The act of interviewing was conducted with several guidelines in mind. First, the interviews were consciously constructed to resemble active conversations. My argument here is that active conversations allow for optimal insight into the thoughts and practices of authors as opposed to interviews structured as regimented question/response sessions or, on the other end of the spectrum, interviews that are conducted around vague and nebulous questions without concrete grounding. In order to target this point between regiment and ambiguity I employed a type of structured flexibility which relied upon my knowledge of the topic at hand combined with an ability to employ a multitude of methodological options. Examples of such methodological options include the various types of questions at my disposal (grand tour questions, concept clarification, closed and open questions, probing questions, clarifying questions, interpreting questions, etc.), the adoption of a deliberately naïve stance in order to evoke further explanation, recognizing silence in an interview as a productive time wherein participants are actively formulating thought, and continually contextualizing the aim of interview for my participants.

I chose to focus on a particular genre, poetry, as well as interview fewer participants, five as opposed to fifteen, to extend my involvement with the participants during the

interviews and to lengthen and strengthen the methodological gaze on the topic of pedagogy. My goal was depth rather than breadth with regard to research topic and participants.

Transcription the interviews was a process of interpretation. The most difficult aspect of transcribing, for example, is the fact that body language and word emphases are lost. How could sarcasm be conveyed? Where should punctuation be placed? Because transcription involves interpretation, transcription becomes one of the first instances wherein multiple disciplines must speak to one another in order to yield data that is pertinent to the different disciplinary fields within writing studies broadly conceived.

Analyzing the transcribed data is an act that engages these various disciplinary orientations simultaneously. For example, my creative writing experience allowed me to understand these writers' interview comments even when they were admittedly idiosyncratic and somewhat cryptic. My composition background helped shape interview questions eliciting responses that could be understood and analyzed across disciplines within writing studies. As a final example, I found my English education background to be particularly applicable when discussing issues of pedagogy.

### **Pulling on Pedagogical Strings: Common Threads Amongst Poets Speaking to Language and Literacy Pedagogy**

The findings of this study are presented within the following categories: *You can teach technique but can only encourage the rest*, *Accelerants as effective teaching*, *Teaching writers to use "inventiveness"*, and *Talk about poetry: Metacognition*. These categories are meant to code and sharpen the communicative qualities of these interviews with poets.

#### *You can teach technique but can only encourage the rest*

The question "Can writing be taught?" is usually ignored by the composition instructor; teachers of composition believe, foundationally, that yes, writing can be taught. The field of creative writing, on the other hand, takes serious exception to this rule and has made arguments involving talent and genius, asserting that only the writer can teach him/herself, that heuristics are useful yet limited, and that even artistic madness can be

a source of invention. This question has immediate relevance to pedagogy since how one answers this question—To what extent writing can be learned?—provides insights into how one orients oneself with regard to the teaching of writing.

Wakoski: “A long and involved answer would be yes and a short answer would be you can’t teach [students] to be a good poet.”

Kerlikowske: “I think you can definitely teach technique. That’s what you can teach. And there’s form and don’t do this and do that, but you can’t teach vision.”

Dybek: “[That question has] always seemed so stupid to me.”

Olsen: “Those students, they’re on a journey and you can’t take it with them.”

Seuss: “I think you can teach someone to write poems. There’s a difference.”

I’ve purposefully chosen to record here some of the more cryptic responses to this question because it highlights the need to unpack the question itself further into (1) what these poets think can be taught and (2) what these poets believe can not be taught. Here is Wakoski on the topic of what can be taught:

You can teach them to be a better writer. You can teach grammar which is really important, and vocabulary, and make them aware of the fact that they need to read books and have information, and you can show them some great poems and then you can critique their own efforts for grammar, for vocabulary, for paucity of information, or generalizations, and suggest that maybe there’s a poet that they might like to read who’s tackled some of these things.

I believe Wakoski is arguing for the teaching of craft and this notion of craft as not only being teachable but as needing to be learned by all poets. It is a commonality across these interviews. Dybek, and Olsen take similar stances on the teaching of craft:

Dybek: What I have to say on the subject is just, and it seems obvious to me, that if you go into a painting class you can figure they can teach you how to mix colors and how to do perspective. If you go into a music class they’ll teach you how to operate your instrument or teach you the art of composition. In other words, the craft can always be taught in all the arts, that’s what you study. When people say you can’t teach somebody to be Beethoven or you can’t teach somebody to be Matisse or you can’t teach somebody to be Charlie Parker well of course you can’t. That’s always seemed so stupid to me. The fact of the matter is that you never hear that with the other arts but you always hear it in writing, that you can’t teach somebody to be Ernest Hemingway. Well, no you can’t [laughter] but just as the other arts have a tradition, a history, and features of craft and you can teach the history, you can teach the tradition, you can teach features of craft, all those things can be taught. And if they’re not learned in a

classroom than the person has to learn them on their own and it's usually some combination. Hopefully you can accelerate what somebody would have to learn on their own.

Olsen: In my mind the text is the greatest teacher. That's how I teach classes. Good poetry is the greatest revelation. I guess what you can teach largely is a love of poetry, not only a love of poetry but a trust of poetry. One thing that keeps people from writing well or that closes people down is a actually fear of poetry, a fear of the freedom it constitutes. We all have internal censors so one thing a teacher can do is try to help a student contend with internal censors. Aside from teaching the craft which I believe in entirely you have to go easy in teaching, you have to judge how much a person is ready for and that calls for constant ability to read people that no one has all the time.

The question "What can't be taught?" is much more difficult to parse from these interviews because these poets adopt a variety of stances. There is, however, a common belief that not all aspects of writing can be taught. Kerlikowske, for example, argues that "vision" cannot be taught: "People either have vision or they don't have vision and you can't teach that leap...from the words to beyond the words. I don't think you can teach that." She amends this to a certain extent by saying "I think sometimes you can see a student is going to make that leap and you can say 'that's it.'" She goes on to share a personal anecdote about when this learning moment took place for her: "I remember when Herb Scott did that for me. He said, 'This is the first real poem that you've written' and I celebrated because I had written zillions of poems before that but I saw how that poem was different and it made that leap to something beyond what it was." I followed this up by asking her what she meant by the fact that you can't teach vision. Her response:

The vision is being able to know...if the student is writing a poem about dogs, can you look at that poem about dogs and see that it could be more than that? Seeing the possibilities of it is vision, looking beyond the page, almost what you would see if you squinted at it and there would be this other poem. Being aware of the possibilities that are out there. I could look at a student's work and say, "Oh my God you're two sentences away from being brilliant here," but it's not there. When I try to talk to them about what direction a poem could go in they say, "No, I want it to be this." And I think, "Well, your wanting it is getting in the way of what it is."

Although Kerlikowske takes the position that vision cannot be taught, we can see here that she does take the time to teach vision to her students, and to help students recognize vision in their poetry when it happens in the same manner that Herb Scott

helped her to recognize vision in her own poetry. Here is another anecdotal example of Kerlikowske struggling to get her students to understand poetic vision:

I have a student in my class right now, he's almost my age, and he asks, "Where do you come up with those bizarre ideas? Are you on acid or something?" I say, "No you just look around." I was typing to him and I saw a picture of a hat and I said, "The hat is lonely, the snow is this." This is not hard. Take a verb, take a noun, take an adjective that don't go together and put them together. But he just can't. He thinks you have to do something special or you have to be on drugs. That's his biggest thing, he thinks you have to be on drugs. No you don't have to be on drugs, you have to loosen up your head.

In as much as Kerlikowske strategizes ways to teach vision, she also sees poetic vision as something in existence before learning—more specifically, before education—that one must protect. "I feel that we all [have vision] and school unlearns that from us; the process of our education is unlearning to think that way" Kerlikowske is referencing here the problem of conformity that results from being an obedient student, that good poetry comes from thinking outside the norm encouraged by a comprehensive, standardized education. Once again she offers an insightful anecdote to help elucidate her point:

Especially when I was a poet in schools, there was the kid up by the desk, always a boy, always left-handed, always sitting next to the teacher because she had to keep him in line. I expected great things from that kid because I knew he was my kind of person. He's a trouble-maker, he would ask questions, he was thinking and that is disruptive in a classroom.

Whereas Kerlikowske names the part of poetry that can't be taught "vision," William Olsen recognizes values and self-motivation as the aspects of poetry that cannot be taught.

What can't you teach? You know what I think it is, you can't teach a person what to write about. The subject matter has to come to that person, the person has to figure out what he or she values. And that means in art and in one's experience. You can't help someone discover his daemon. Those students, they're on a journey and you can't take it with them. Sometimes all you can do is swab the decks. That's not a full, concrete answer but there are other things I guess. If you are going to be a writer you have to be self-motivated. You got to want it yourself. Seeing someone else do it well can be inspirational, you get that from reading. I found that to be true in my teaching experience. Sometimes I'll want it more for the student than the student wants it and then I'm an imposition and I have to draw back.

Similar to the experience Kerlikowske references about the time her poetry teacher, Herb Scott, helped her to notice the achievement of poetic vision within her own poetry,

William Olsen shares the way his former teacher helped him to develop as a poet. This anecdote revolves around Olsen's view of the importance of encouragement:

When somebody writes something good sometimes their first instinct is actually to distrust it, to question it, to consider it a fluke because it demands more of them. And I think—I've told students this in defense of my teaching methods—that encouragement is the most demanding form of criticism. I work through encouragement. It worked for me. I had great teacher in Jon Anderson and it worked for his students. If he found a poem he really liked he would stop the class and praise the poem and validate the community and not negate any individual in the class and make the notion possible that "Yes, good poetry can be written and it has just happened."

For Olsen, encouragement is difficult for students to deal with because students no longer have the option of naming a success a fluke. Another reason success is difficult to accept is that the creative process, when successful, is a disruptive process—it necessarily uproots prior notions and takes the author to a different plane of understanding and, ultimately, being. This relates closely to Olsen's notion of helping students contend with internal censors—censors such as fear that can stunt and inhibit a student writer's development as a poet.

Diane Wakoski discusses what can't be taught in two ways that are, eventually, very closely related. In a turn that is directly in line with Olsen's self-motivation comment ("You got to want it yourself"), Wakoski forwards the argument that you can't teach someone to want to be a poet.

But will they learn [aspects of craft]? If they have some kind of aptitude for language and are really interested in poetry as an art form then yes, they will. But there are people with aptitudes for language who really rebel against the kinds of things that poetry does and so I don't think you can teach them to be poets because they don't want to be. If you said, "Well what if they want to be?" Well, what if I had a crippled leg and I wanted it not to be crippled? I probably couldn't do anything about it. If they don't want to be poets then they don't want to be poets and I don't believe in brainwashing. I think that my one experience is that you can make anyone who writes and is willing to do the same amount of work that they would do in a math class into a better writer.

In addition to the argument that you can't teach someone to want to be a poet, there are several other ideas present that relate to the question of what can't be taught. First is the notion of an "aptitude for language," which for Wakoski is closely related to the idea of talent. "I and my generation believe in something called talent," she says, "although I don't necessarily think you can test for it. That's what my generation believed." Wakoski

makes an argument for talent while also holding to her belief that you cannot teach someone to want to be a poet:

When I see people in beginning classes they are people who have truly bad educations and people who have better educations and sometimes the person with truly bad education has more talent for writing poetry than the person with the good education so there is something to this talent thing. I'm not saying it's immeasurable, I'm just saying right now we don't have good measures for it. If you combine talent with education then there is one more ingredient and you know what that is, you have to want to do it. And lots of talented people are multi-talented and lots of well educated people are educated in various things and sometimes they lack the desire to do even one of those things, at least in a primary way.

The second argument embedded in Wakoski's response is that you can teach someone to be a better writer but that doesn't mean they will become a successful poet. Wakoski is firm in her conviction that she can make anyone who walks into her classroom a better writer and she also believes that she can help people to think like a poet:

Can you make them think like a poet? Well, thinking like a poet means thinking metaphorically and that means being interested in abstract things that are explained by concrete things and finding unusual and beautiful language. I don't know why you couldn't help them improve what they're doing.

The important qualifiers here are "better writer" and "improve what they're doing" and they relate back precisely to what frustrates Stuart Dybek about the nature of the question itself as to what can and cannot be taught. "That's always seemed so stupid to me. That fact of the matter is that you never hear that with the other arts but you always hear it in writing, that you can't teach somebody to be Ernest Hemingway."

Diane Seuss says, "I'm a good guide but I can't teach them." This is a common response from these poets—the idea that the teacher can serve as a guide, even an accelerant as Dybek puts it, but final onus is placed on the writer him/herself. Looking across these authors we see an insistence that features of craft can be taught. Beyond that, the art of poetry is elusive. Kerlikowske references "vision" as being un-teachable, Wakoski references that unquantifiable notion of "talent," Olsen talks about "values" and "self-motivation" as important features of the poet that cannot be passed along, and Dybek vents frustration at the question itself because he feels that writing gets burdened by this question more often than do other fine arts. Nevertheless, all of these authors have

made it their job to help writers. As Dybek says, “Hopefully you can accelerate what somebody would learn on their own,” which is a surreptitious way of finding a place between these tensions of what can and cannot be taught because, on the one hand, this statement places the burden of learning/developing on the shoulders of the writer while on the other hand it creates a space for the teacher to be helpful.

What does this tell us about how these writers position language and literacy pedagogy? In the final analysis it seems clear that they believe that writers are ultimately responsible for developing their own writing processes. What can’t be taught, according to these poets, are the highest-order concerns such as vision and recognizing when a poem has reached *that* level. The lower-order concerns of craft are entirely teachable but the highest-order concerns do not operate under the same set of rules. Ambiguity, paradox, chaos, surprise—these characterize the place of poetic vision that a writer has to navigate for him/herself. Olsen says, “they’re on a journey, you can’t take it with them.” Seuss says, “I’m a good guide but I can’t teach them.” Wakoski says, “You got to want it yourself.” Kerlikowske says, “You can’t teach vision.” There is a clear message here that the successful poetry, while possibly aided by good teaching, is ultimately a task unto oneself.

### *Accelerants as effective teaching*

“Draw the space between the objects, not the objects.” My Drawing 101 teacher would repeat this again and again, trying to get us to understand the concept of negative space. And then one day it finally made sense to me. Years of beginning my drawings by outlining the objects before me were suddenly called into question and I started to begin with outlining the negative space—the space between objects—in order to get the relationship between objects correct from the outset. This paradigm shift was a sudden realization to me even though my art teacher was exasperated and frustrated by the time I finally understood what he was after. In some ways this insight might be seen as happening as a result of repetition, or of good direction—however one speaks about it, it functioned to get me to the next level of drawing. My art teacher’s words were a necessary accelerant to my artistic development.

I remember my first course with Stuart Dybek in much the same manner. The class was titled “Forms in Fiction.” He would hand out short writing pieces as examples and I wanted to talk about what the pieces meant, how the author was representing characters and building themes. I was this student that Dybek references:

One of the things I’ve noticed in my creative writing classes is that people come in there as very good readers and they want to talk about a piece of writing as readers and what I keep trying to get them to do is talk about it as a piece of writing, how it was made rather than what it means.

...especially in the context of academia where writing, unlike the other arts, is not in a fine arts department but mostly in an English department in which people are mostly taught courses on how to read. Very little attention is ever paid in an English department, in English courses, to craft. So if they don’t get it in the writing classes they’re not getting it.

It finally dawned on me during the course of the semester that I was bringing to bear a full repertoire of reading skills that I had derived from years of schooling and years of teaching such skills. In much the same way that I finally shifted my paradigm to understand and literally see negative space, I can remember just as distinctly the moment I began to see writing as examples of craft at work, examples that could be reverse engineered in a move that lent insight into how they were made. This paradigm shift accelerated my understanding and practical approach to writing. The title of this section, “Accelerants,” borrows from Dybek’s view of creative writing pedagogy—“Hopefully you can accelerate what somebody would have to learn on their own”—and my own experience of learning to read as a writer. This section deals with those elements of teaching that these authors have found useful in their own classrooms when working to accelerate students’ understanding of the creative writing process.

Dybek succinctly articulates his position on this issue: “I think craft stimulates the imagination and sometimes becomes inseparable from it.” He adds, “I have over years of teaching found certain exercises, in certain situations for certain people, do in fact seem to generate some imaginative work but, for me, that’s secondary to teaching craft.” Dybek in fact makes the point that positioning oneself as a teacher and stimulator of the imagination has its drawbacks: “Can you teach somebody to be more imaginative? I think on rare occasion you can by devising certain exercises but that’s gravy. I’m a little

wary of people who put all their energy in that direction actually because sometimes I think it can become autocratic.”

In addition to telling his students that “Good poetry is the greatest revelation” and helping students “contend with internal censors,” William Olsen talks about helping writers develop by providing them with an example of a poet’s life, structuring the workshop away from consensus, and discouraging students from relying on explanation in their writing.

Some of it is instruction by example—at least it was for me with my best teachers—they provided an example, a representational of a good life, a life I would be interested in living. I think that instead of the social construct called the “workshop” leading people to common denominators and something like consensus, an ideal workshop leads people towards divergent paths. It helps to have friends, ad-hoc friends, and friends tell other friends when their work is going awry [laughter].

...the instant I hear a student saying, “I wanted the poem to do this” I instantly distrust the poem. My guess is that the poem has been over consciously directed towards event.

Several interview excerpts from Diane Wakoski provide insights into her pedagogical accelerants:

- Over the years she has developed the notion of trope to help guide student instruction.
- Revision is the cornerstone of her instruction: “Even the crappiest thing could be made better by some kind of revision....”
- She prides herself on being a good critic which means “finding order in somebody else’s writing.” She continues to say “The primary task of a critic is to work with good writing and to show people how much better than they might think it is that it actually is.”
- “You can teach them to be a better writer,” she says, in terms of craft. Additionally she encourages her students to read books and introduces them to poets that might be tackling the same problems they are struggling with.
- She reasons that a teacher can help students think like a poet by encouraging students to think metaphorically.

Viewing effective creative writing instruction as a process of accelerating a writer's development carves out a particular pedagogical position—a position characterized by viewing writing as a personal journey, viewing writing as containing limitless variety, viewing writing instruction as a mentor/mentee relationship rather than master/student. Above all, it strikes me that the way these poets speak to effective writing instruction as accelerating a writer's development combines the craft elements of writing instruction with the notion that being a creative writer is a way of existing in the world—a mindset that is more concerned with ongoing development than final arrival.

### *Teaching writers to use "inventiveness"*

According to these poets, inventiveness includes specific approaches but is more importantly a mindset. When I spoke with Wakoski about viewing writing as an act of presentation rather than viewing writing as an act of discovery, she had this to say:

Well, you know from seeing enough beginning writers that everyone begins with writing as an act of presentation and when they say "I can't think of anything to write" it's because they have nothing to present to you and when they do have something to write it's because they broke up with their girlfriend or they went on a trip and saw cherries on the tree for the first time or whatever, they have something to present to you. Fiction writers want to present characters and/or plot...fiction writers are more likely to have to work with having something to present. But poets, you say I feel like writing a poem, you have nothing to present and so then you have to use your inventiveness. And that's something that most beginning writers don't know how to access. I won't say they don't have it, I'll say they don't access it.

The distinction made here between beginning writers and established writers, as well as the distinction made between fiction writers and poets, is useful in understanding not only Wakoski's view toward the teaching of poetry but also the writing of poetry. For Wakoski, student writers need help developing their inventiveness when nothing is present in the real world to evoke enough emotion within them to write, to express something on the page. This is when student writers need to use their "inventiveness," as she calls it, in order to cull enough drama from their memories to get them writing. This is certainly a representative view of Wakoski's own process as much as it is representative of what she feels her students go through. The old adage that we teach to ourselves as learners comes to mind here. The distinction made between what fiction writers do and what poets do is an important one also in terms of Wakoski's pedagogy.

Having been in poetry classes and poetry workshops with Wakoski, I know that a familiar phrase she uses to help developing writers understand poetry is “that’s not what poetry does, too much narrative, too much explanation, there’s no mystery here.”

Elizabeth Kerlikowsk writes alongside her students using techniques such as free-writing prompts and has them experiment with different forms just as she does during her own periods of invention. She believes that one can “definitely teach technique” and although she doesn’t believe poetic vision is wholly transferable, she continues to encourage students to look at their writing in new ways with new possibilities. When I asked her about the separation of the creator and editor she spoke to the difficulty students have with this concept:

[The creator and editor] have to be utterly separate. I mean that’s the problem with students. They say, “I have to have the perfect first sentence for my paper,” and I tell them, “no, you don’t.” But they think they do and a lot of people have writer’s block because they can’t start with the perfect line and I’m way beyond that. I can write a whole bunch of shit and when I finally hit the perfect line I know it.

The adage about teachers teaching to the way they themselves learn applies since Kerlikowske is continually moving back and forth between how she learns as a writer and what she teaches. “I pay attention to these observations that I’ve come across,” she says, “and they seem to hold true and I try to teach that in my freshman composition courses.” Similarly to all the poets interviewed, Kerlikowske references the fact that students are much more presentational than they need be in their writing:

Well, they had something in mind when they started and by god that’s what it’s going to be even if it’s not that. And I want to say, “Let it go here, that’s where it should go” and they say, “No, it needs to be this, that was my plan.”

Yes, students will think, “The assignment was this.” I try to tell them, “The assignment was this but if you get a better idea for Christ-sakes do that.”

This notion that students should let their writing lead them, even if it takes them away from the aims of the assignment, is consistent with Kerlikowske’s view of education in general: “If you can hang on to your thinking through school and get through that then you are ok. But if you’ve been a good student then you will be just like the next person.”

For Kerlikowske poetry is an act of professing one's individuality, an act of stepping outside the norm and pushing one's unique thoughts into the world. She recognizes national schooling as a move toward making students obedient and believes this directly counters what poetry is all about. This is in contrast to Diane Wakoski and William Olsen who forward the notion that education can enable poets. There is a fine line then between education as a push toward conformity and education as a scaffold toward higher thinking. Although these poets differ as to the purposes of education, they each make conscious strides to construct their classrooms as places where inventiveness is rewarded and can "happen."

Teaching inventiveness manifests itself most directly in the assignments that writing teachers assign to their students. For Olsen and Wakoski, the workshop model is the dominant construct in the classroom. Olsen visualizes his writing workshop as encouraging poets toward divergent paths. Kerlikowske, being a community college instructor, politicizes the workshop more directly than most writing teachers by helping her students learn the language of successful vocations. In order to do this she adopts a political pedagogy in which she informs her students of the need to code-switch.

But at the same time you can't talk this way and get a job in a bank. You just can't do it, that's how it is. So I try to approach even teaching in a very political way and say, "They're looking for a way to not give you that job. Don't give it to them. Get the job, talk how you want to, but know that you have to write like this."

Diane Seuss calls herself "a real assignment-driven teacher." Her approach to assignments, and the assignments themselves, provides a clear view of her approach toward the teaching of invention:

I set up uncomfortable assignments. I do a lot with randomness, with time limitation, with "you have eight lines and these emblematic words that you've chosen, write a poem in eight minutes." As they get better, as they grow, we read D.A. Powell, who's dying of AIDS, who's writing this way and then I ask them to turn the paper sideways and see what happens if they fill a page with lines of that width. So a lot of it is stuff that I ask them to do structurally which makes them uncomfortable.

For Seuss, successful invention is a re-invention every time, a breaking of habits and expectations into the new and unexpected. This pedagogical approach is the same as her personal approach toward invention in her own writing. This approach challenges students to step outside of their comfort zones rather than encouraging them to develop

at their own pace. “You have to rise up to it,” she says of the types of forms assigned in her classroom.

Another way that Seuss teaches inventiveness is through limitation. For Seuss, limitation is creative.

Right, that’s why in high school when their creative writing teacher comes and says, “I want you to go out and write a poem about nature”—what’s that?

*It’s so open-ended that it cuts the process.*

That’s right. .... No. Go outdoors and find a walnut and crack it open and look inside of it and taste it and then put yourself inside of there and write on the walls in side-lines, then maybe that will be interesting.

*That’s a great prompt.*

So it’s setting people up to have to invent.

Notice how similar this pedagogical move and explanation is with what Anis Bawarshi claims of genre: “Genre...places writers in positions of articulation,” or how similar this is to Rollo May’s assertion that “Form provides the essential boundaries and structure for the creative act.” Here is Diane Seuss again:

Here’s the first thing I ever have my students do, so say you are one of my students, so I hand you this [digs into her bag and gives me a small, decorative change-purse] and I say write a five-line autobiography and this has to be in every line. You name it and you tell me the story of your life in five lines with that in every line. Well that’s a ridiculous assignment, and you know what? They’re brilliant at it. Limitation is creative.

Limitation is creative. And yet, Seuss also talks to her strategies of breaking students out of their habits of mind into new, unexplored territory. Herein lies a generative paradox: limitation is creative and freedom is creative. The teacher’s job, then, is to find the appropriate moment to utilize limitation or freedom and do so in the appropriate measure. In her final assessment—which mirrors that of Olsen, Wakoski, Kerlikowske, and Dybek—students must eventually be left to their own devices to explore, reflect, and play their writing lives into existence. Rollo May says “the freedom of artists to give all the elements within themselves free play” is the *sine qua non* of creativity—a thesis which counters his other thesis that form provides the necessary structure for creativity. So which is it? Well, it’s both. In the same manner that good teachers deploy both challenge and encouragement along with all else in between, good teachers deploy both structure and freedom and all shades between and they try to do so at the appropriate time and with the appropriate measure. William Olsen says “Aside from teaching craft

which I believe in entirely you have to go easy in teaching, you have to judge how much a person is ready for and that calls for constant ability to read people that no one has all the time.”

There is an underlying tension between viewing freedom as the precursor to invention versus viewing restriction as the precursor to invention, and listening to these poets helps us to see that it's both. Invention heuristics can serve as blocks to invention as the composition scholars Mike Rose and Sondra Perl argue. Invention heuristics can also serve as tools of convention, shaping the way students perceive and respond to the world. Invention heuristics can also be the necessary scaffold toward new insights. They can also create spaces within which resistance can take focus and shape. Anis Bawarshi makes this argument by claiming that genres are enacted by writers and act upon writers. Rollo May claims that language itself is at once used by, and uses, the writer. One important pedagogical deliverable of this analysis is that in order to foster invention teachers need to enable their students to more often take advantage of form, limitation, and genre as opposed to being taken advantage of by form, limitation, and genre.

*Talk about poetry: Metacognition*

Whereas Stuart Dybek and Diane Wakowski certainly demonstrate through these interviews that they are deeply and sophisticatedly aware of their writing process on a metacognitive level, they do not speak to this metacognitive awareness directly. Elizabeth Kerlikowske and William Olsen, however, do speak to this type of metacognitive thinking and they echo the positive effects of such intellectual work.

Kerlikowske: I think the more you know the better and I think knowing how you work is really crucial. I'm mystical in that I recognize that there is mystery in the process but I'm not mystical in that I don't believe that if I talk about it I will be robbed of that power. That's really just superstition, and I don't think I'm a very superstitious person so my writing wouldn't be either.

Olsen: I rather like talk about poetry. That's part of what poetry offers, a subject to talk about. I like exchange about poetry and I don't mind talking about my own methods because it's one of the ways artists learn from each other.

What's interesting to me about metacognitive thinking and talk is how it's seldom given credit by creative writers for leading to successful production of creative texts. There is actually quite a bit of scorn heaped on "academic" thinking or even creative works that reference themselves as being a creative work (Wakoski hates poem about poems, for example). On the other hand, the fields of composition and English education view reflective, metacognitive work as perhaps the premier indication of sustained learning. Students aren't viewed as having achieved mastery over a topic until they can accurately explain the steps leading to their conclusions. This applies to invention pedagogy within composition and English education classrooms but not to creative writing classrooms. In fact, Wakoski goes so far as to tell her students, "That's why you should never explain your poems, it takes all the magic away." There are two different educational paradigms at work here: one that views success based on a student's ability to explain process and one that views success based on one's ability to suppress and sublimate process. Coleridge claimed to have woken from a dream and written "Kubla Khan" in a fit of ecstasy. Only later did scholars come to believe there were several drafts written over several years before publication. Obviously Coleridge knew something about marketing the inherent mystique surrounding the invention process of poetry.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The purpose of this section is to draw out several pedagogical implications resulting from this interview data. These implications are both immediately useful to classroom practice (i.e., they present various avenues of thought which enrich practice) and speculative (i.e., these implications name areas and pose questions where future work can provide greater insights).

The poets collectively argue that "You can teach technique but only encourage the rest." The most direct implication for writing pedagogy would be a focus on teaching technique and elements of craft. What does this look like? The most dramatic implication, and one that Tim Mayer's outlines in *(Re)Writing Craft*, is that we need to begin balancing reading and writing instruction. In addition, these poets imply a change in the way we teach writing. Writing instruction must take a decided turn toward teaching writing for the sake of writing, not in the service of reading. The traditional academic essay is an exercise in effectively communicating one's interpretation of a text which privileges reading. Why not reverse this process? As Stuart Dybek explains based on his thirty-plus years of

teaching, he is continually encountering students who want to talk about meaning and metaphor and symbolism as opposed to how a text was made. As writing teachers, we are missing an opportunity to teach craft if we do not teach reading as a type of reverse engineering with a focus on how a text is constructed for the sake of informing students' writing habits and abilities. This is what it means to read like a writer. Another implication for pedagogy is that writing assignments should be generated for the sake of writing, not always for the sake of reading. This would mean more creative assignments such as the short story and poetry as well as the creative non-fiction story and the personal essay. Furthermore, I believe these poets are calling for an epistemological stance where reading services writing development. Rather than reading being the genesis of writing prompts and projects, writing projects should be the genesis of text adoption. This epistemological change would necessitate a focus on craft as texts are chosen to facilitate the writing process. For example, if a student begins working on a second-person short story, then reading materials that take advantage of this particular form should be used to aid the student in developing his/her story.

What else does a focus on craft look like? If I were a painter I believe it would be easier to identify craft. For the painter, craft looks like a color wheel, dirty brushes, stretched canvases with splashes of paint. My point is that craft elements for the writer are less tangible and I believe this to be a contributing factor to why writing craft does not garner the attention it should. For the writer, craft begins with language. Often to the exclusion of other means, we encourage our students to begin with an idea, plot line, or even a thesis. A focus on craft would have our students begin with exploration and play with language.

What does exploration and play with language look like in the writing classroom? There are several activities that place an emphasis on play with and exploration of language before an emphasis on meaning-making. For example, "Found Poetry" is an exercise where students pair words and sentences from magazines, billboard signs, and texts. Combining and recombining words and sentences into a found poem is an example of not only play and exploration with language but Found Poetry is also an exercise that privileges writing over the interpretive act; Found Poetry is a writing exercise that does not need to emanate from an interpretation of an existing text. "Juxtaposition" is another activity that emphasizes play and exploration with language while privileging the act of

writing as the locus of invention. In Juxtaposition students place several observed images on the same page with one another. Through this juxtaposition of images, students create a new, cumulative text. “Freewriting” is another such exercise, first enacted by surrealist poets and made popular again by such writing pedagogues as Peter Elbow. In Freewriting the writer is challenged to keep writing past the point where he/she is able to use thinking as a precursor to writing.

Play and exploration with language changes the locus of invention. Rather than viewing language as the effective communication of ideas formulated before the writing process begins, play and exploratory activities with language place the inventive moment at the moment of praxis—at the moment when ideas and practice coalesce. This is a much more dynamic, unregulated, and receptive view of the language/thought interplay and as such yields different results with our students writers—results that should be cultivated alongside the more traditional and dominant view of writing as the expression of pre-formulated thought.

Another common pedagogical approach shared by these poets is their emphasis on accelerating the development of the individual writer; writing instruction as paying attention to the personal stance of the writer. This stance dictates that critical feedback should embrace what the writer is trying to do as opposed to what the teacher holds in mind that the writing should be doing or what the form/genre of the writing should entail. This is another location in writing pedagogy where I believe the scales need to be balanced. In my experience, writing teachers tend to focus their feedback on genre and assignment expectations as opposed to thinking through authorial intentions. Teaching discernment—the ability to recognize writing that is working—is another aspect of accelerating the development of a student writer. As writing teachers it becomes incumbent to emphasize what is working as much as what is not working for our students.

Teaching writers to use inventive heuristics is another way to accelerate development. Inventive heuristics include the generative qualities of genre and form, the separation of the creator and the editor, and the ability to view both freedom and limitation within the writing process as generative conditions. The commonality among these inventive heuristics is a view of the writing process as paradoxical. Genre and form are often seen

as limiting factors but the converse is also true: genre and form can serve as indicators and directional cues for writers within the process (see Bawarshi, 2003; Devitt, 2004). The creator and editor are another example of viewing writing as the successful positioning within a paradox—the paradox of inhabiting both the creative writing persona and the editorial persona. The key to navigating such paradoxes successfully is to vacillate appropriately between these opposing poles as the writing event dictates.

This leads to my last pedagogical implication: the importance of thinking metacognitively. Metacognitive thinking is the ability of the writer to understand his/her writing process in a conscious manner and this type of thinking becomes a primary goal of writing instruction and, subsequently, a primary pedagogical heuristic to help students navigate an artistic process that is paradoxical in nature. Creative writing students need to know what conditions are best suited for their writing development. Do they work best with a prescribed deadline? What kind of feedback aids their writing and what kind of feedback stultifies? During the act of writing, how can the perception of audience help and hinder? There is a limitless array of questions that can be asked of students to help them begin to theorize their way through a metacognitive understanding of their own writing habits and rituals. In her book, *Writing as a Way of Healing*, memoirist Louise DeSalvo recommends students keeping a process journal as they write. This process journal becomes a metacognitive storehouse serving as a writing invention heuristic. Another one of the positive outcomes of metacognitive thinking and writing is that students can be active participants in shaping the atmosphere surrounding the writing process. Metacognitive development can also take place laterally in student-to-student conversations. To refer back to the poet William Olsen, it's important for artists to develop and learn from one another. Peer review in which students are consistently reading and responding to one another's work is a pedagogical structure that encourages this type of metacognitive, collaborative, peer-to-peer communication. Metacognitive instruction is the most sound pedagogical method I have encountered to help accelerate writing instruction other than deep, elongated immersion which is, of course, logistically problematic given the structural time constraints of the typical classroom.

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**Appendix: Abbreviated Bibliographies of Poets Interviewed**

**Stuart Dybek** has two collections of poetry, *Brass Knuckles* and *Streets in Their Own Ink*. His fiction includes *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*, *The Coast of Chicago*, and *I Sailed With Magellan*. He was recently awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, the "genius award" that gives individuals selected for "extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits" a \$100,000 grant annually for five years. He has an MFA from Iowa and currently teaches at Northwestern University after more than thirty years of teaching at Western Michigan University.

**Elizabeth Kerlikowske** has published numerous poems in a wide variety of journals. Her books include *The Shape of Dad* and *Dominant Hand*. She teaches at Kellogg Community College and is a self-described "poet of the community." She commented in our conversation that "I like to have people who are not overly educated be able to understand my poems. I think that's part of my mission in this life." Toward this end she has been the president of *Friends of Poetry*, a small non-profit organization existing to promote the appreciation of writing and poetry. For the past fifteen years she has also worked with the organization *Creative Writing in the Schools*.

**William Olsen** is the author of four collections of poetry, *The Hand of God and a Few Bright Flowers*, *Vision of a Storm Cloud*, *Trouble Lights*, and *Avenue of Vanishing*. *The Hand of God and a Few Bright Flowers* was reissued in 2003 as part of the Carnegie Mellon Classic Contemporary Series. He is co-editor, with Sharon Bryan, of *Planet on the Table: Poets on the Reading Life*. He is the recipient of a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation, an NEA Creative Writing Fellowship, a *Nation/Discovery* Award, The Texas Institute of Arts Award, a Breadloaf Fellowship, and poetry awards from Poetry Northwest and Crazyhorse. He teaches at Western Michigan University and the MFA Program at Vermont College.

**Diane Seuss** has been teaching writing at Kalamazoo College "for nine-thousand years." She is the author of the poetry collection *It Blows You Hollow* and, most recently, *Wolf Lake, White Gown Blown Open* which won the Juniper Prize in Poetry. Seuss's work has recently appeared in *Poetry*, *New Orleans Review*, *The Georgia Review* and *Hanging Loose*.

**Diane Wakoski** has published over forty books of poetry and her honors include a Fulbright fellowship, a Michigan Arts Foundation award, and grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Michigan Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts. She has been living and teaching in East Lansing, Michigan since 1976. She has recently published her 22<sup>nd</sup> collection, *The Diamond Dog*.