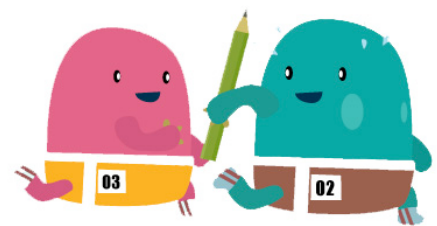


The academic eccentricity: creative writing in the classroom

By Iain Broome

Write for Your Life



A quick word

This e-book was written in 2003 as an essay. It was put together during my time on Sheffield Hallam University's MA Writing course. The version you read here is available to download for free from Write for Your Life, my blog about writing. You're welcome to pass it on and distribute it as you see fit.

The essay remains relatively unchanged and some of the quotes from academics and other writers are great, but it's worth keeping the date it was written in mind. Creative writing courses have continued to sprout up across the UK (and elsewhere, no doubt) in the last six years. I think it's fair to say that they're looked on more favourably these days, and I don't hesitate to tell people that my novel was written as part of a postgraduate qualification.

1

Creative writing as an academic subject remains in a process of evolution. The latter half of the twentieth century saw the growth of writing courses across the country in higher education. As a number of universities developed their existing English literature courses to incorporate the study of creative writing, the early 1990s also saw the new National Curriculum place a greater emphasis on writing at GCSE and A level.

I want to consider some of the changes in contemporary culture that have contributed to the development of creative writing in an academic context. The courses themselves seem to go from strength to strength and their popularity suggests that there is a general belief that creative writing is worthy of its place in academia.

Before that though, I want to look at the process of teaching creative writing, and question whether it can be thought of as a taught process at all.

2

So far, the most significant obstacle facing the establishment of writing courses has been in justifying their legitimacy. For many years, the study of creative writing was looked at as something of a luxury. Even today, it's typical to find it tied to a straightforward English Literature course, as opposed to existing independently.

However, this at least means that there is now some sort of recognition that the experience of writing can be used to facilitate critical analysis, and surely vice versa. Indeed, it seems strange for those who have a desire to study literature, not to want to practice the art itself.

Alternately, it seems impossible to be a successful writer without a basic understanding of the history and diversity of the craft. As Matthew Sweeney and John Hartley Williams state: "Just as it's impossible to be a professional footballer if you never watch football matches, it's impossible to write poems if you don't read them."¹

So, as ever, reading and writing are to be considered mutually, and some parts of academia are beginning to reflect that by including creative writing as an option on existing courses. Some

¹ Sweeney, M and Hartley Williams J, *Teach Yourself: Writing Poetry and Getting Published*. Page 1.

institutions, of which Sheffield Hallam University and the University of East Anglia (UEA) are prime examples, make creative writing a compulsory element of their English degrees; they go under the title of English Studies and not English Literature.

However, this infiltration into mainstream English is a relatively recent occurrence. Previously, creative writing was seen by many as something to be considered only by a select few. Those with 'natural ability' could perhaps think about taking writing as an extra option; perhaps a little like a treat. Anyone else should concentrate on his or her study of literature, as this has generally been regarded to be of greater importance.

Nick Rogers, in his essay ' Teaching writing at A level' , states: "I remember, both at ' A' level and at degree level, teachers vaguely alluding to mysterious creative writing options which we were rapidly advised not to consider unless we were very confident of our talent... I am sure that if I had the nerve to broach the subject of my own writing they would have been interested and no doubt helpful. The problem was that there was no room for creative writing in English."²

² Montieth, M and Miles, R (ed) *Teaching Creative Writing*. Page 96.

This was often the case, but undergraduate and A level creative writing at that time (it's difficult to be specific, but around the mid- to late-seventies and eighties) was dependent on its connection with English to provide its legitimacy and credibility. As a separate entity, creative writing still struggled to be taken seriously. It was often accused of not really being a subject at all due to the very personal and subjective nature of both its teaching methods and assessment.

However, many institutions began to take the plunge and look at forming writing courses as separate autonomous subjects. In 1982 Crewe and Alsager College of Higher Education did just that, but suffered the sort of criticism that was no doubt expected. One tutor there, John Singleton, in his essay 'Creative writing and assessment: A case study', describes some of the allegations labelled against it: "It was unscientific, untrustworthy, without any apparatus of critical methodology, without a legitimising tradition... What was it? Literary studies in drag?"³

It seems that the fundamental difficulty in bringing credibility to creative writing in an academic context centres on the same argument that persists even today: can it be taught? The rejection of this notion prior to its development in higher education saw creative

³ Montieth, M and Miles, R (ed) *Teaching Creative Writing*. Page 67.

writing confined to community projects and workshops that had the appeal of say, joining a local scout group.

What the formation of standalone courses in higher education did was give the study of creative writing a stamp of approval, a sense of authentication. To do that, writing had to break away from English and become a subject in its own right.

3

The National Curriculum as set in 1990 has allowed creative writing to become part of a number of A level syllabuses, with students able to discuss their work in groups and have it count towards their final grade. Undergraduate courses too, as illustrated by Sheffield Hallam and UEA, amongst others, now place creative writing alongside the more traditional elements of an English degree; literature, language and linguistics. However, the place where writing has truly been able to flourish in an academic arena is at post-graduate level.

The first MA writing course was founded by Malcolm Bradbury and Sir Angus Wilson in 1970/71 at UEA. Although it's taken until recent years for such courses to become widespread, this was the first time creative writing asserted itself academically, aiming to prove that it deserved credibility as a subject, and could indeed be taught.

Paul Magrs, in his essay 'A Good Thing', writes, "Bradbury talked about the course's initial premise being the dismissal of the concept of 'genius' and the idea that students can be taught to write like they might be taught to mend a car"⁴. The course itself proved

⁴ Bell, J and Magrs, P (ed) *The Creative Writing Coursebook*. Page 377.

popular, and it remains so today. However, despite the success, the doubt over creative writing being a taught process still exists.

It is difficult to know how much of Bradbury's initial premise for the course reflected the terminology used by Magrs. Indeed, the concept of 'genius' has always been attached to creative writing – the idea that the ability to write is a natural, almost innate phenomenon that simply doesn't require study or to be taught. Simply by establishing an academic course then, Bradbury dismisses this concept.

Unfortunately, the analogy used, that students can be taught to write like they might be taught to fix a car, also seems unsatisfactory. Creative writing is inescapably subjective. It's also personal in that each writer must go through his or her own mental process individually, and there must be variation from person to person. The analogy suggests that teaching creative writing is a generic process, industrialising as a straightforward transfer of knowledge and technique.

Steve Gooch, in *Writing a Play*, puts it like this: "It would be folly to generalise from one's own total experience of writing –

feelings and all – and imagine that it could apply to everyone else. In this sense writing cannot be taught.”⁵

So, it is accepted that creative writing cannot be taught as if it were a science. There are no right or wrong answers and part of the process must come from a certain intuitive, more personal methodology. However, there seems to be further holes, both in Magrs analogy and in the concept of teaching creative writing as a whole.

The term itself, ‘teaching creative writing’, implies that anyone can be taught to write. Indeed, that also seems to be the implication of Magrs analogy and Bradbury’s thinking. Although creative writing has been recognised as a valid part of studying English at A level and undergraduate level, when it comes to post-graduate level the attitude is far from ‘anyone can be taught’.

The current UEA MA prospectus sums it up like this: “It is not intended for the beginner, making no claim to teach those who are not yet writing how to write.”

Postgraduate writing courses have evolved in terms of their marketability. They are now in a position to offer their places only to

⁵ Gooch, S *Writing A Play*. Page 1.

those who have already proved themselves to be writers of a certain standard – a passing interest alone is little qualification.

The truth is, entry to a course where a student's writing is taken seriously involves a process of rigorous selection. If Bradbury's initial premise was for the course to be able to teach those with an interest in writing, then times have certainly changed.

Postgraduate writing courses in the twenty-first century are a serious business. It costs thousands of pounds to get on them and they are taught by experienced, professional writers. You don't get on to a postgraduate creative writing course unless you can already write. And even those that do can consider themselves a privileged minority.

Julia Bell, in her introduction to *The Creative Writing Handbook*, comments, "There remains in circulation a myth that creative writing can't be taught... you've either got it or you haven't, so there's little point trying to teach it. The success of the writing courses at UEA and elsewhere belies this myth"⁶.

Well, that's ok on the surface, and doubtlessly those students who helped the courses achieve success had their writing improved by the experience, but they were handpicked – the cream of the crop. In short, how much were they actually *taught*?

⁶ Bell, J and Magrs, P (ed) *The Creative Writing Coursebook*. Page 337.

The point is this. Using Magrs' analogy, if you were to teach someone how to mend a car, you could start from scratch and gradually, the student could learn which part goes where. If you were to teach a student how to write, the process would be entirely different, and indeed it is in postgraduate study, where a certain level of ability is expected. This doesn't mean to say that the concept of 'genius' should be reclaimed, more that a level of personal intuition and imagination must be acknowledged.

For example, on a basic level, a creative writing tutor may explain and discuss the formalities and complexities of a Petrarchian sonnet, such as rhyme positions and line numbers. For the student who didn't already know this information, then maybe they have been taught.

Unfortunately, and perhaps this is where the conflict really lies in this debate, the student still has to undergo the task of writing the sonnet on their own. And that will forever be a process reliant on personal intuition. Arguably, this is an intuition that can never be taught in the same way that someone can be taught to mend a car.

Despite this difficulty in legitimising creative writing academically in terms of its ability to be considered a justifiably 'taught' process, the courses prove to be ever popular. The students

on these courses must surely learn something otherwise they wouldn't continue to fill up year after year. How important is this debate anymore?

Moira Montieth and Robert Miles, in their introduction to *Teaching Creative Writing* look at it like this: "Caught up with the historically embattled position of creative writing, we had our eyes fixed on arguments defending its legitimacy, thus forgetting, or missing, the fact that the argument had moved on, that creative writing, having found its feet, was capable of making more positive sounds."⁷

Indeed, creative writing has found its feet, and it seems a little trite and unconstructive to continually argue back and forth about whether it can be taught. Whether it can or not, there seems little doubt that writing courses create an environment in which students can learn. Perhaps the terms to 'teach' and to 'learn' can be considered removed from one another.

Julian Birkett agrees. In *Word Power, A Guide to Creative Writing*, he states, "You (students) cannot be taught how to write,

⁷ Montieth, M and Miles, R (ed) *Teaching Creative Writing*, Pages 2-3.

but you can learn about it... through writing, through criticism of their writing, through reading, through watching and thinking.”⁸

⁸ Birkett, J, *Word Power, A Guide to Creative Writing*, Page 1.

4

So, instead of treading the infinite debate about the credibility of writing in academia, let's turn to what it can offer in terms of an environment and experience that doesn't necessarily create, but rather develops writers.

What a writer does when they attend a creative writing course is place themselves amongst their contemporaries. These may well be of a wide and diverse level of experience, but they are of a common interest and similar goal – to improve as writers. It is simply being involved in this setting that initiates the learning process.

Where previously there may have been friends and family to rely on for feedback on work, the new environment is one where more detailed and more experienced opinion can be given. Perhaps the creative writing tutor's main role, it seems, is to facilitate this process of feedback and discussion, both between themselves and the student, but critically, among the students as a group.

As Magrs says, "Writing courses are a place for conversation."⁹ However, the conversation must always be approached with an open mind. Learning about the writing process

⁹ Bell, J and Magrs, P (ed) *The Creative Writing Course Book*. Page 375.

is done by listening to the way in which others attempt their writing, how they balance their time schedules, and what opinions they bring to the discussion. These are things that can only be provided by the sort of atmosphere produced by a creative writing course.

Here's what Sheffield Hallam's MA Writing claims to offer in its 2002/03 Course Guide: "It is intended to appeal to graduates in arts, to teachers with a professional interest in creative writing, and to practicing writers who need contact with their peers in an environment that pays attention not only to the craft but also to the business of writing: editing, manuscript preparation, marketing, etc."

The term *craft* is one frequently referred to in relation to teaching creative writing. Hallam's synopsis of their course emphasises the idea of providing an *environment*, but also the idea of writing as a type of craft. This seems to add weight to the argument for writing as a legitimate academic subject. Moira Montieth, in the essay 'Creative Writing: A historical perspective', suggests: "Stressing the craft involved in the practice of writing has the

strategic effect of presenting creative writing as a task, laudably accomplished if worked on.”¹⁰

The term itself suggests skilfulness, expertise, a journey towards a specific profession. Indeed, it implies that there are a number of techniques, forms, and practices that can be learned and built upon in order to excel. It almost sounds like it could be a taught process after all. But really, the creative writing course’s ability to pay attention to the craft is simply its way of providing a space for the analysis of student’s work.

Creative writing courses are based upon the student developing their own skills through the contact of others. It is the tutor’s role to assist this process and ensure that it occurs; they are there to guide, advise, observe, encourage, and when necessary, criticise. The result of this is a student who is then able to approach their writing in a very analytical manner, as individual pieces but also in context with the work of their peers and contemporaries.

This again highlights the connection between reading and writing – creativity and criticism. When a student reads the work of others, they inevitably become critics. Surely, when they read their own work, they must also do the same. Isn’t this constant process of analysis and revision the only way to improve as writers, or to

¹⁰ Montieth, M and Miles, R (ed) *Teaching Creative Writing*, Page 19.

develop the *craft*? Christopher Volger, in *The Writer's Journey*, disagrees: "Some professional writers don't like the idea of analysing the creative process at all, and urge students to ignore all books and teachers and 'just do it'... for them, art is an entirely intuitive process that can never be mastered by rules of thumb and should not be reduced to formula. And they aren't wrong."

In terms of the writing process itself, perhaps Volger has a point. After all, it's already been said that, ultimately, it is the writer who must do the writing. But a creative writing course and its environment doesn't simply aim to bring the process to a level whereby it can be thought of as putting pieces of a jigsaw together. Its purpose is to develop the writer by enhancing his or her awareness of his or her self in relation to writing as an industry. And to do that, there must be a certain measure of self-analysis.

Perhaps the distinction must come by thinking about whether a course teaches creative writing, or teaches people to be creative writers. By referring back to the Hallam course synopsis for their MA Writing, it seems to be the latter that they offer. Teaching people to be creative writers infers that there is a definite vocational element to a course. That not only does it provide a chance to improve a student's ability, but it grants them the opportunity to

learn about the many other aspects of being a creative writer, like revision, audience, marketing, and ultimately getting published.

At postgraduate level, where writing is taught by professional and experienced writers, this sort of 'first-hand' knowledge is valuable and unlikely to be found elsewhere. Again, creative writing courses are popular, people must want to attend them for a reason. There must be some sort of preconceived idea of what the student is going to get before they apply, Presumably, something other than just becoming a better writer.

Julia Bell takes this view: "There are plenty of students who will write good stories or poems, maybe even get them published who wont go on to enter the world of writing, but in learning how to generate and shape a successful piece of writing they have added something important to their repertoire of life skills."¹¹

This seems perhaps a little hard to believe entirely, and although the sentiment fits with the notion of creative writing as an enjoyable pastime, in terms of writing as an academic study it might be rather naive to think that a student would be happy with having simply added to their 'life skills'.

¹¹ Bell, J and Magrs, P (ed) *The Creative Writing Course Book*. Page xi.

People spend thousands of pounds and give up a significant amount of time in achieving a postgraduate certificate in creative writing. There must surely be a reason for this, a target or goal in mind. Russell Celyn Jones, in his essay 'Standards in Creative Writing teaching', says: "Would-be writers now regard a creative writing course as a prerequisite to getting published."¹²

This may well be the case and whether it can be considered the *real* definition of the word writer or not, publication is a form of reward, a form of authentication and the feeling of having 'made it' in some way. Indeed, it seems that the majority of students in postgraduate study approach writing as secondary to a separate career or occupation. The monetary value of achieving publication, although pleasant, may not be as much of a reward as publication itself.

There may be others whose goal it is to make a living solely out of their writing. For them the idea of the creative writing course as a stepping stone towards getting published may not be quite so pertinent. They may be looking to achieve the information required to use their ability to make their way into the industry in a variety of ways – not just through fiction, but journalism, teaching etc.

¹² Ibid, Page 246.

Whatever the goal, the academic creative writing course provides an environment that is more than a place in which to transfer a body of knowledge or a series of fixed formulas. It takes the art of writing seriously and looks to facilitate the imaginative and intuitive process of writing rather than dictate it. The courses prove popular because students approach them with the belief that their money is going towards their improvement and development as writers entering the writing world.

5

So, how does contemporary literature and contemporary culture look upon the creative writing course now? Having seen how the courses have grown in stature and looked at how they work, can they be considered a success? Is the time, money and effort of their students really worth their while?

Despite the popularity of writing courses, it seems that some are still unconvinced by the idea. Celyn Jones reports again: “The MA workshop has taken quite a lot of flak from people in the industry, principally publishers who claim that writers are born and not taught.”¹³

This doesn’t bode well for writing students. It is worrying indeed to think that it’s the publishers that look upon writing courses with an element of disdain. It could perhaps be expected that publishers would have the opposite reaction, that they would look favourably upon those writers who have seen fit to place themselves among their contemporaries in a *writing environment*.

Students on a writing course must feel that they can improve otherwise they wouldn’t be there. In truth, there is no such thing as perfection and it seems strange for “people in the industry”, as

¹³ Ibid, Page 246.

Celyn Jones puts it, to criticise those who show a willingness to examine their writing. The suggestion here is that what the student thought was a productive exercise, a method of enhancing their success as a writer, inevitably ends up being to their detriment.

George Marsh, in his essay '43% – A commentary on aims and assessments in the teaching of literary writing', states: "Professional writers are judged by publishers and then by readers. There is no such thing as 43% or 53% in the writer's world."¹⁴ Of course, there is truth in this. Just as the writing process is forever a subjective process, in many senses so is the critical process. One person's view of a piece of work may be very different from another person's view.

However, Marsh continues to say: "The market will have quite different criteria from an institutionalised creative writing lecturer."¹⁵ Might the creative writing tutor find this somewhat offensive? Many of them are professional, working writers and so to suggest that they are institutionalised seems absurd. Also, part of the purpose of most courses is to assist the student's approach to finding a market.

The modern creative writing course should work in sync with the current marketplace and seek to guide its students accordingly.

¹⁴ Montieth, M and Miles, R (ed) *Teaching Creative Writing*. Page 46.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, Page 46.

Surely the criteria of the tutor and the criteria of the market must have some resemblance. Admittedly, a badly written, trashy novel may sell well but not receive a high mark from a writing tutor. However, that is only one market. It is up to the student to respect and trust that their tutor has the knowledge and experience to assess their work in terms of its literary merit and its contemporary context.

The complaint though, it seems, is that a writer who has not attended a creative writing course will not be stifled by analysis, learning specific techniques, and will generally have written with more imagination and fluidity. Magrs disagrees when he says: "Writing courses are sometimes accused of producing writers like clones, through workshops that prune the distinctiveness and oddities out of their work. If the courses are good, I think they make writers who are entirely distinct."¹⁶

In most cases, the courses don't make writers at all. They are in fact already there but waiting to have the chance to take themselves and their writing seriously. Hopefully, someone else will too.

¹⁶ Bell, J and Magrs, P (ed) *The Creative Writing Course Book*. Page 379.

So, it remains the case, creative writing as an academic subject is in a state of evolution. Perhaps writing is something that cannot strictly be taught, but in the right environment and through the contact of experienced and likeminded people, there is always something to be learned. Whether creative writing will ever be considered a mainstream subject is another matter. In basic learning, facts and figures still have a stronghold over creativity.

The truth is though, more and more people write. The rapid widespread expansion of first the word processor and now the home computer means that the laborious task of putting pen to paper can now be avoided. Those that show signs of having ability might feel they want to push themselves into furthering what perhaps was originally intended as a hobby. A creative writing course then seems the perfect place in which to explore that ability.

At a guess, those that try and take this step feel that it is worth the effort and money. They feel that this is a good way to give themselves the chance of being *a writer*. They want to learn, they want to improve, and they feel that they are putting themselves in the best possible environment for doing so. But also, surely, they want some reward at the end.

It's not to suggest that those who take a creative writing course automatically deserve their place in the literary canon of the

future, or even publication at all, but the popularity of creative writing courses surely stems from the appeal of this stepping-stone-like concept. Whether the creative writing student ever achieves success with any regularity remains to be seen.

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