How and What Do Creative Writing Teachers Teach And What Do Creative Writing Students Learn?

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In discussing these questions, I will address the general principles applied in my teaching of creative writing; I teach across a broad range of areas—verse (in its many forms), short fiction, novellas and novels, monologue, memoir/autobiography, faction, ficto-criticism, metafiction—and the specific application of these principles varies somewhat within these areas. First, I will address what I consider to be the “false situation” of the classroom for creative writing. I will then discuss the processes that can be explored and learned in this limited environment, demonstrating its workability and effectiveness.
Often when opening a lecture or seminar, especially to first year students, I will state: In art, the first rule is, there are no rules. And the second rule: always maintain the right to contradict yourself. This usually gets a laugh (and I think it was George Bernard Shaw who said about teaching: “Make them laugh or they’ll hate you.”), but it is hardly adequate, it needs elaborating upon.

In one of his many letters to his fiancé, Felice, Kafka said of writing:

...writing means revealing oneself to excess...This is why one can never be alone enough when one writes, why there can never be enough silence around when one writes, why even night is not night enough. (in Heller & Born,183-184)

The student/writer is certainly not alone in the classroom; there are also all kinds of expectations placed upon them, they are among people whom they mostly do not know, and there is a time limit to their
creative activity.

To take this idea of the need to be alone further (before explaining what I think can be done in the classroom), if one agrees with Kafka, then why is “even night...not night enough”? I think it is because it is only when you are in an absorbed, unselfconscious state of mind that the creative energy kicks in; only then can the work fully engage you, only then will it in turn have any chance of engaging others.

Some people have used drugs effectively to achieve this state of absorbed unselfconsciousness, but it is obvious that, unless you have the constitution of a rhinoceros (like Charles Bukowski) you will not live a long or happy (or creative) life if this is your methodology, and I also don’t think you will achieve your complete potential as an artist. There are a number of possible exceptions to this contention, but who is to say what extra heights Coleridge or Michael Dransfield or Dylan Thomas (among others) would have achieved if they had escaped their various addictions? And how many unheard-of artists of great potential have destroyed their artistic potential this way?

But let us get back to the question of focus, of being absorbed in one’s work, and how difficult this may be in the classroom. Richard Flanagan wrote that:

The creative path is dark, groping, essentially mysterious. If you are listening to any voice other than your own, you’re lost, or, what is more likely, are yet to cross the threshold that marks the beginning: the loss of self-consciousness and, in its place, the detached exploration of self. (7)

*The detached exploration of self.* This is what I hope the students achieve within the false situation of the classroom. And whatever difficulty they have in applying this principle in the classroom, they will at least learn the principle for further use. It is in the light of this principle that the grading of students’ work should be explained: As well as it being subject to the individual taste (and moods!) of the examiner, the quality of the work will be influenced by the students’ varying ability to cope with the false situation, and their ability to achieve a *detached exploration of self*, i.e. their loss of self-consciousness.

Some students cope better with this than others. Some students pick up on the principles and processes of writing more quickly than others. This is why the grades and marks, although important, especially for further study, should not be taken too much to heart. I think it is important to explain and discuss these limitations with the students in
the initial classes. Doing so seems to relax them, disarming an atmosphere that may otherwise be overwhelming, even stifling for them. The result is that their creative work becomes easier, less self-conscious, more effective, and they become more supportive of each other.

So, students may rightly ask: If the classroom is a false situation, what are we doing here? This is a good question, and one that should always be asked.

My answer is usually along the lines of: We cannot teach you how to write, but we can help open up the doors of (your) perception and experience so that you can learn to write, you can learn to discern and criticise your own writing and that of others, to speed up and facilitate a process that might take you much longer and might otherwise
discourage you. This process may also involve the theoretical analysis and the undertaking of higher research and further study leading to employment that will support your creative work. It is also important to point out that, while this theoretical analysis may cross over into students’ creative work, and may even help to inform it, it is a different activity from creative writing, and wherever possible it should be treated separately. There is, of course, the exception of ficto-criticism.

I am often asked by student writers, who should they be writing for? Many established writers I have read say that they write for themselves. Though there are times within the fog of creation that I become aware of the possibility of an “audience,” these thoughts are fleeting if the work is engaging me at all. From this the obvious questions arise: WHY should one not think of who will be reading the
work? And if so, HOW is this achieved?

The HOW comes from the said unselfconscious engagement with one's work, the absorption with it, which, hopefully will pass over to the reader; but if it doesn't, at least the writer will enjoy creating it. The WHY is more contentious. There are some students (and artists/writers) who need to know who their audience is/will be; but generally, I sense that any thought of the future for an artistic work while it is in process, will inhibit and diminish it.

And let us get something straight here: I am alluding to creative work of the highest possible quality, otherwise what is the point? Like Alice Munro's first person narrator in *Live of Girls and Women*: “They were talking to somebody who believed that the only duty of a writer is to produce a masterpiece” (1971, 61). And further, if the artist/writer is thinking about WHO they are writing for, they may not be absorbed in the work (i.e. unselfconscious) and it is likely to become contrived and/or polemical.

I also suggest to students who are worried about whether they can become great writers or not that they can relax, because if they are to become great writers they will become great writers, no matter what they do. This is not to say they will not have to work hard, but they will be compelled to work hard, because they have a hunger to write. Charles Bukowski made the important distinction between those who want to be writers and those who want to write. I would say need to write.

And what of those students who will not become great writers? Some of them will become very good writers, whose work will be loved by a small audience, or even a large audience, but their work won’t last like a great writer’s, it won’t create the same depth of feeling. And what of those students who don’t continue to write beyond the creative writing classes? Is their study a waste of time and energy? Of course not.

They will be far greater teachers, publishers, academics, doctors, lawyers, administrators, journalists, shiatsu masseurs, etcetera, than they otherwise would have been, because they will know more about themselves and about how theirs (and other) minds work; they will be more articulate, and they may even continue to develop their writing while pursuing their alternative vocations in publishing, editing, film-making, journalism, etcetera; and they will more than likely continue to be keen and critical readers. One of the profound beauties of Creative Writing as a discipline is that it is so obviously not specifically vocational. And what of those students not suited to creative writing classes who would otherwise be great writers? As I have
implied already, they will become great writers in spite of, not because of any hindrances.

My basic approach to “opening the doors” with students involves the close reading of literary texts, including, where necessary, theoretical texts, as well as the “triggering” of ideas through particular exercises on ideas and situations.

There are basically two processes in the art of writing that should be addressed separately: 1) The inspiration or drafting of raw material; 2) The redrafting and perfecting of this material.

1) Inspiration

I take the view that nothing will be discovered if you know what you are looking for. And if you know what you are looking for, the reader will also know, soon enough, and they will quickly become disengaged i.e. “dead.” If in the Eighteenth Century you decided to set out from Europe to discover the world you would not have found much if you had gone to the places you already knew about; nor would you have gotten far if you had jumped in the Atlantic and begun swimming. You would have to have prepared a ship (structure) and provisions and equipment (language) and sailed off in the direction you (or no-one) had never gone before (the unknown). Of course, if you went to a place you already knew in a NEW WAY, you may have discovered something new about HOW you got there, but perhaps this is where the analogy becomes confused; or it reflects the basis of ficto-criticism.
In *A Moveable Feast*, Ernest Hemingway talks about writing in the morning until he couldn’t keep writing (from fatigue or other commitments). “I always worked until I had something done and I always stopped when I knew what was going to happen next. That way I could be sure of going on the next day” (15). He also advised not going back over your work too closely until it was finished, and not to think about it until you were doing it:

> It was in that room that I learned not to think about anything that I was writing from the time I stopped writing until I started again the next day. That way my subconscious would be working on it and at the same time I would be listening to other people and noticing everything, I hoped; learning, I hoped; and I would read so that I would not think about my work and make myself impotent to do it.” (15-16)
One of Hemingway’s earliest and most significant teachers, Gertrude Stein in a conversation with John Hyde Preston, in 1935, spoke about this initial process of inspiration:

You will write if you will write without thinking of the result in terms of a result, but think of the writing in terms of discovery, which is to say that creation must take place between the pen and the paper, not before in a thought or afterwards in a recasting. You won’t know how it was, even what it is, but it will be creation if it came out of the pen and out of you and not out of an architectural drawing of the thing you are doing. Technique is not so much a thing of form or style as the way that form or style came and how it can come again....

You cannot go into the womb to form the child; it is there and makes itself and comes forth whole—and there it is and you have made it and have felt it, but it has come itself—and that is creative recognition. Of course you have a little more control over your writing than that; you have to know what you want to get; but when you know that, let it take you and if it seems to take you off the track don’t hold back, because that is perhaps where instinctively you want to be and if you hold
back and try to be always where you have been before, you will go dry... (159-160)

The citing of the above ideas does not mean that I am advocating an avoidance of opinion or polemic in the creative work. What I am advocating is the un-self-conscious delivery of that polemic, so that it is subtle, hidden, and even ambiguous rather than overt, contrived, or preaching. The latter is the province of essay, dissertation, and exegesis. There are exceptions to this, but generally if the reader smells an argument, a position being taken by the author (as distinct from the narrator), the spell is broken. The spell is what engages, what makes the reader think and imagine, what allows them to make up their own mind, hopefully toward the mysterious truth that art can suggest.

And so, whether it be a piece of verse or a novel, let us presume the student now has a piece of raw material, a rough draft of some kind,
which they must now revise or rework, because they cannot expect a piece to come out completely formed—although this does and can happen. And if you are a writer you will enjoy this process as much as the discovery process. I cannot understand writers who say they hate writing. What I hate or find difficult about writing is when I am not writing, when I am between large works or when my inspiration machine is having a “rest” i.e. re-filling the inkwell.

2) The art of redrafting and perfecting

The longer you can leave between creating this piece of raw material and going back to work on it the better. And here again we have more evidence of the “false” situation of creative writing classes. But these classes are about (apart from "opening doors") about the learning of processes, learning that it is as difficult for others as it is for all of us, more or less. So, you have left your raw poem, your raw novel alone for a week, a month, a year—Ralph Waldo Emerson advised: "Never read any book that is not a year old" (188). Now you can read it as if it were someone else’s, now you can read it and hear its flaws—in language, idea, structure, etcetera. Now you can attack it ruthlessly. But this is a learned art, one that can be partly taught but is always only fully learned by reading and by writing and by working on one’s writing.

In summary, I suppose what I am attempting to suggest is that, rather than the teaching of creative writing, what is required is the allowing of it, its facilitation or release from the person; the presumption being that people are natural story tellers, natural “creators” of pattern and inference, that they have this and learn this as part of their formative learning, and they need it in order to communicate and know themselves and others in the large scheme of things. They are not ignorant of these fundamental inclinations to invent and create, their abilities need only to be encouraged and teased into form.

References


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**About the Author**

**Grant Caldwell** writes poetry, short stories and novels. He has had seven books published, five of poetry. His work has been published widely in Australia since the early seventies, as well as in Canada, Colombia, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan and U.S.A. His 1996 collection “You Know What I Mean” (Hale & Iremonger) was nominated for the Age Book of the Year Award. His latest book is the poetry collection “Dreaming of Robert De Niro” (Five Islands Press, 2003).

Grant was awarded a Category B Fellowship by the Australia Council in 1992, and a Category A Fellowship in 1994. He has also received two Arts Victoria grants. In 1991 he co-wrote and co-directed/performed the poem-play *Call it Poetry—Tonight* at the Wharf Theatre (Sydney Theatre Company), Sydney. In 1996 the Australia Council funded his attendance at the Medellin International Poetry Festival in Colombia. In November, 2005 he was invited to represent Australia at the 3rd Wellington (NZ) International Poetry Festival.

He is a lecturer at the School of Creative Arts, University of Melbourne, Victoria. He completed an M.A. (Creative Writing, English) at University of Melbourne in 2004, and is currently writing a Ph.D. (Creative Writing) at Deakin University. He has been awarded the Heinrich Boll writer's residence on Achill Island (Ireland) later this year (November-December 2007).

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**About the Artist**

**Arthur Szabo** Photography has always been a hobby which has now progressed into a passion. Taking photos and being bitten by a travel bug has changed my view of the world. I now enjoy seeing the world through the lens. This perspective encourages you to look at the details
of your surroundings no matter where you are. It is always difficult to
get on film (or sensor) what you picture in your mind.

Finding patterns, designs and repetition in nature help to bring out the
natural beauty; when shared, this approach helps others recognize the
beauty around them. This challenge is the driving force that makes me
visit a place again and again until I get it right. My passion is best
rewarded when I am able to share it with others. www.artszabo.com