Introduction

Creative writing has been one of humankind’s most pervasive and long-lived arts, as well as one of our most intriguing forms of human communication. Long-lived, in that as soon as we humans began to inscribe words, we began to use that inscribing for creative purposes. Intriguing as a form of communication because creative writing is often not aiming to communicate directly or unambiguously, but rather to encourage thought, to elicit emotional response and personal interpretation.

Ancient in its foundation and strongly present in the contemporary world, almost every location around the globe has seen some human engagement in creative writing, and in many it has contributed to the emergence and prominence of the publishing, media, and performance industries, among other creative industries. Creative industries are those parts of the economy that trade in creative products and creatively enhanced experiences, as well as in the generation and exploitation of knowledge. Despite this, situating creative writing within a discussion of the creative industries is not very common. Much more common is discussing creative writing in relation to specific material outputs (that is, novels, poems, scripts, and so forth) and according to its relationship with particular kinds of language use.

An initial difficulty lies in how we define ‘creative writing’ compared to other forms of writing. In the simplest terms, where does creativity begin and where does it end? There is no easy answer. Another significant puzzle relates to whether we define creative writing according to material things or according to actions. In the larger part, history has witnessed creative writing defined by its material outputs. Thus the teaching of creative writing has been divided along the lines of teaching students to write poetry, or teaching them to write short stories, or teaching them to write screenplays, and so on. This is not universally the case, but frequently it has been so. The final output in effect creates the definition of creative writing and the teaching associated with it. By defining it this way alone, we miss much of what creative writing really involves. We can, instead, define creative writing by saying that it is the actions associated with writing creatively, that these are informed by the human imagination and by the intellect, and that these actions employ individual, as well as cultural, knowledge. Of course, to describe creative writing only this way leaves out something of the truth.

Therefore, we best define creative writing by saying: Creative writing is the action of writing creatively, informed by the human imagination and the intellect, employing both
personal and cultural knowledge, and creating a variety of results, some private, some public, some tentative, and some in various ways complete.

Historical perspectives

When, in the seventeenth century, Anthony A. Wood (1691–92) undertook his monumental work *Athenae Oxonienses: An Exact History of All the Writers and Bishops Who Have Had Their Education in the University of Oxford – To Which Are Added the Fasti, or Annals of the Said University*, he was, according to his title, referring to those who had learned writing while at Oxford University. Not all of those included in Wood’s survey are what we would call creative writers in a contemporary sense; some, we almost certainly would. Furthermore, the education to which Wood refers is not largely based in formal creative writing classes, but in a variety of informal learning, from personal mentorship to what, in today’s university, would often be called interdisciplinary exchange.

Anthony Wood’s creative writers were largely learning to write creatively via what can be called educational osmosis. In a similar informal pedagogic vein, John W. H. Walden (1919: 11), in his *The Ancient Universities of Greece*, makes note of the singing of lyrical poetry to the accompaniment of the lyre in fifth-century BC Athenian education. However, Walden (1919: 6) pinpoints some more formal aspects of writing teaching by suggesting that such learning was enhanced by the studying of literary style, expression, and the power of description. Topics such as these are not unusual in formal creative writing teaching even today.

In his 1955 book *Ancient Education*, William A. Smith (1955: 81) speaks of the influence and power of those with developed skills of literary expression in ninth-century AD China, and comments that much emphasis was therefore placed on this within Chinese colleges and schools, at one point to the detriment of education in science and technology. Smith’s (1955: 81) wariness – Smith commenting that, because of this emphasis on education in literary expression in China at that time, ‘science and technology failed to develop on an adequate scale’ – is perhaps as much influenced by notions present in the mid-twentieth century, when he was writing as it is a depiction of conditions in ninth-century China. Concern over how much formal creative writing education should occupy the time of students in higher education, or how productive such formal teaching really is for the individual, as well as for society more generally, remain topics of debate.

Commonly, teaching is considered to be the bringing about of learning, or the leading of someone to knowing something. Imparting, guiding, and instructing are all associated with teaching. Palpable examples of creative writing teaching away from institutions of education quickly come to mind: the creative writer learning while working in some kind of publishing, or in some other field of writing such as journalism; the creative writer taught by his or her involvement in another creative art in which such things as form, function, style, or address to an audience traverse the mediums of expression; the creative writer guided by or led to knowledge through his or her exposure to finished works of creative writing.

DeWitt Henry (2012: 17) writes of such informal educational circumstances when he asserts that ‘just as the combination of shoptalk, mutual editing and critical theory is exemplified by Wordsworth and Coleridge, surely the nexus of Hawthorne, Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau and other New England writers of the 1840s exemplifies an American school “without walls”’. Writing earlier, Muriel Harris (1921), in an article in *The North American Review*, similarly bridges a discussion of Britain and the United States in the activities of the French salon and the English coffee house. She comments on Henry James living in the
London borough of Chelsea, ‘carrying the salon spirit with him’, continuing to note that, ‘in Chelsea too, there are today a number of well-known English families of long literary heritage, whose weekly gatherings have a good deal in common with the thought of the salon’ (Harris, 1921: 827).

As Harris’ comment shows, not least because of the predominant social dimensions of the borough of Chelsea, the impact of social class and the commodification of literature has had some part to play in the history of informal creative writing learning. So it was that the eighteenth-century shift away from literary patronage and towards commercial publishing created conditions under which creative writing learning of an informal nature was interwoven with changes in how literature might reach its readership.

While the later existence in the early twentieth century of such groups as, say, the Bloomsbury Group could be said to represent another condition of informal creative writing learning, whereby group members learned from each other, it cannot be said that, in a group such as Bloomsbury, creative writing learning was made available to an extended social group, its members being so entirely upper middle class. The same difficulty of locating widely impactful informal creative writing teaching and learning can be recognised in how eighteenth-century shifts in literary commodification impacted on the coteries and circles of literary London, as ‘a professional writer, it was felt, should be servant to no one but the public. His work should not reflect the etiolated taste of a sybaritic aristocrat but rest on the firmer foundation of public approval’ (Brewer, 1997: 162). But the type of person who might learn to write creatively was still very socially limited, up until the expansion of access to higher education, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century.

There are today a relatively small number of histories of formal creative writing teaching in modern universities and colleges, although there are many commentaries on the emergence of particular creative writing courses, biographical notes on teaching faculty, or notes on the publishing success of a particular student or students. Thus Robert Dana’s (1999) edited work *A Community of Writers: Paul Engle and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop* cannot be faulted for being a history of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop; after all, it claims to be nothing more. However, history works in the relationship of the holistic to the individual, the wider story to the personal story, as well as in the relationship of the individual to the holistic, the personal stories that contribute to the whole. It is the former that remains uncommon in the historiography of formal creative writing teaching and learning. Furthermore, concerted historical accounts of research undertaken into the practice of creative writing, or through the practice of creative writing, so as to inform methods of teaching or to offer interpretive or theoretical insights, are so far so rare that they might be considered non-existent.

This largely reflects a tradition, into which Dana’s book neatly fits – that is, the tradition of speaking mostly about those who have taught in an institution or department, or of making note of the successes of students in having their finished works published or performed. A good example of this tradition is provided by the American Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), founded in 1967, in the programme for its annual conference, the largest creative writing teaching conference in the world. The AWP conference programme contains dozens of advertisements listing faculty and students’ successes in gaining publishing or performing credits, very little about pedagogic approaches, and nothing about discoveries made through creative writing research.

Because there are still relatively few comprehensive histories of creative writing teaching in modern universities and colleges, it is important to highlight examples. *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing since 1880* by D. G. Myers (1996), *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* by Paul Dawson (2005), Michelene Wandor’s (2008) *The Author Is Not Dead*,...
Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing after Theory, and Mark McGurl’s (2009) The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing are all excellent examples. The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing since 1880, although the oldest of these four works, is no less influential today than it was when published. Myers’ (1996) book has as its focus the teaching of creative writing specifically in American colleges and universities, and this needs to be kept in mind when considering the conclusions reached. The existence in the United States of teaching units concerned with composition and rhetoric sets apart this American experience from those in some other national arenas in which these do not exist. Additionally, the author’s analysis emerges from his interest in the condition of literary study and departments concerned with this. Screenwriting and creative writing in art and design therefore receive little attention in the book. His arguments that, following the Second World War, ‘creative writing programs became a machine for creating more creative writing programs’ (Myers, 1996: 146) and that ‘creative writing was originally an enterprise for bringing the understanding of literature and the use of it into one system’ (Myers, 1996: 167) do not hold entirely true in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia.

Australian Paul Dawson (2005: 2) remarks, in Creative Writing and the New Humanities, that ‘the history of creative writing needs to be seen as a series of educational responses to the perennial “crisis” in English Studies, rather than an apprenticeship which developed alongside and largely untouched by Literary Studies’. He chiefly explores notions of knowledge in creative writing, saying in contrast to Myers that:

instead of resting on an assumption that writers were absorbed into the academy, the account of the historical origins of creative writing which I shall provide is a means of enquiring into how it came to serve the needs of writers in terms of apprenticeship and patronage.

(Dawson, 2005: 5, emphasis original)

He concludes that ‘the disciplines of creative writing hovers today between a vocational traineeship for the publishing industry and an artistic haven from the pressures of commercialism’ (Dawson, 2005: 214).

In her The Author Is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing after Theory, Micheline Wandor (2008), who is based in the United Kingdom, offers a third geographically informed history. For example, Myers’ (1996: 168) notion that ‘creative writing had become a national staff of writers who teach writers who go on to teach, and to hope for tenure and promotion’ is at best partly correct in the United Kingdom, not least because there is no system of academic tenure. Wandor undertakes a wider sweep than either Myers or Dawson, from critical trends to creative writing organisations, from self-expression to literacy. She suggests that:

[T]eachers from [creative writing] in the UK come from two professional groups: (a) career academics (generally within English) and (b) professional writers, brought into higher education to parallel musicians, performers, painters etc. (professional practitioners) who have for many decades taught their art expertise to students.

(Wandor, 2008: 2)

Myers and Dawson speak of creative writing in higher education as the story of a success, and Wandor (2008: 1) begins plainly with her statement that it is ‘one of the success stories of the late twentieth century in the UK’. Mark McGurl (2009: ix) similarly opens The Program
Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing with a success statement, saying that ‘paying attention to the increasingly intimate relation between literature production and the practices of higher education is the key to understanding the originality of postwar American literature’. He reads the history of creative writing in higher education from the fictional texts emerging in the post-war period, and he reads into and through the biographical trails of the authors whom he considers. With chapters such as ‘Art and alma mater: The family, the nation, and the primal sense of instruction’, this is the history of certain creative writers on campus and the works that emerged because of their academic location, and it is the history of the condition of post-secondary education in post-war America.

Because of the scarcity of comprehensive histories of creative writing education, there is a tendency to fall back on individual institutional or individual creative writer histories. While these provide some background, they distort the historical picture. For example, creative writer histories tend to be about writers who have gained some fame. The majority of creative writers do not become famous, so those histories do not give a balanced picture of creative writing education, nor, in fact, do they claim to be seeking to give a balanced pedagogic history.

Certainly, such institutional developments as the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in the United States, founded in 1936, and the postgraduate course in creative writing at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom, founded in 1970, heightened public knowledge of creative writing in higher education while further formalising the educational exchanges involving creative writers that had long occurred in universities and colleges. More so, however, contrasting aspects of the history of creative writing in higher education are revealed by first considering the existence of formal units in US post-secondary education devoted to composition and rhetoric, where there are strong theoretical contentions. This contrasts with conditions in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia, where these units do not exist. Thus theoretical investigations specifically of creative writing more readily occur, for example, in Australian higher education.

The general American insistence on creative writing as exclusively studio arts practice, theoretically underpinned by the critical study of literature, as indicated by both Myers and McGurl, means that the history of creative writing teaching in the United States is in the largest part the history of that relationship. Contrasting national conditions also mean that the idea of research in and through creative writing, widely referred to and funded by research sponsors in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia as ‘practice-led research’, whereby creative writing is understood to be able to ‘produce new knowledge’ (Harper, 2013: 280), is not a significant feature of creative writing pedagogic history in the United States. ‘National differences’ such as these likewise relate to how current critical issues and topics in the teaching of creative writing are focused and find audiences (Earnshaw, 2007: 7). Nevertheless, some shared international issues have historically arisen.

Critical issues and topics

The issue summed up in the simple question ‘Can creative writing be taught?’ continues to appear as one international topic of discussion, both in academic and popular culture circles (Galchen & Heller, 2014; Murray, 2011), even though creative writing has been taught for so long and by so many people, with so many students, in so many places that to ask if it can be taught avoids the fact that it has been – much as to suggest that there is tension between ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’ in creative writing learners’ abilities ignores that we have attempted to teach creative writing to a wide variety of people regardless. This does not make the ‘nurture’
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vs ‘nature’ debate irrelevant because, as Anne M. Harris (2014: 33) suggests in her chapter ‘Young playwrights’ ink’, it is possible to find ‘deeply important patterns’ when the ‘creative skills, gifts and attributes’ of individuals are considered. However, just as Harris (2014: 33) questions whether her own sample study is at all ‘generalisable’, so too teachers of creative writing commonly have dealt with individual cases of a learner’s ‘skills for creative thinking and endeavor’ (Harris, 2014: 24) and generalised observations have proven as unproductive.

That noted, reasons for teaching creative writing do at first appear to be widely polarised. This is a second key issue. At one pole there appears to be the ideal of self-expression, self-development, self-determination. As both art and communication – and as an art involving that most common communication tool: words – creative writing is expected to empower the individual emotionally and, in a broad sense, developmentally. At the other pole there is economic pragmatism, the pursuit of a career in which writing creatively is either an essential skill (for example working as a writer for television, film, or leisure software) or in which the study of creative writing provides career enhancement (for example teaching the language arts in a primary or secondary school, or writing for communication fields such as advertising or journalism).

This neat polarisation is attractive. Sadly, it does little to reflect reality. It is impossible to separate self-expression from employment, or personal pleasure from pragmatic labour, in creative writing. Some creative writing teaching relates to the commercial world; some, more to self-expression. The learner exploring poetry might not imagine the potential blockbuster income of the screenwriter, or the writer of stories for computer games might not be in a position to express quite the personal sensibilities available to the writer of experimental short fiction, but this is a spectrum of practice, not a polarisation.

If teaching creative writing must in some way articulate its core pedagogic approach – and in much formal twenty-first-century education, subjects of study are asked to do this – then a teacher of creative writing usually situates his or her teaching within a network of human interests, personal, pragmatic, individual, and cultural. Often, defining types of success best pinpoints a teacher’s purpose: if no one in the creative class succeeds in having a work commercially published or performed, if no one sells a story or a poem, a script, or a novel to any publisher, media company, or similar, a creative writing class can still be successful because what is learned is not necessarily commercially significant. A creative writing class can be successful if a student releases not a single word into the public realm, but privately writes many words and, because of the class – perhaps during the class – discusses some things about creative writing that he or she did not previously know, and perhaps was even able to put these into practice, strengthen them, and come to understand them further.

The teaching of creative writing incorporates such things as a critical understanding of creative practice, enhancing knowledge about creativity. Creative writing teaching also incorporates the understanding of the forms and functions of texts, introduces and examines choice of modes of communication, and even potentially improves self-confidence by developing skills of self-expression. Carl Vandermeulen (2011: 2), surveying creative writing teachers, writes that they ‘say their teaching is most heavily influenced by their experience as writers and readers’, and that:

[A]lthough many of us have been exposed to composition theory, nearly 60% of teachers responding to my survey indicated either little or no influence upon their teaching of creative writing from books, articles, conference sessions, workshops or courses in composition theory and practice.

(Vandermeulen, 2011: 8)
Nigel McLoughlin (2008: 90) also comments that ‘since most Creative writing teachers learn to teach through watching their predecessors teach them, most pedagogical practices are passed on in a rather unstructured, piecemeal and almost osmotic or subliminal fashion’.

In this sense, creative writing teaching is a highly individualised activity, much like creative writing itself, to the point where some educationalists, such as Mike Sharples (1999: 3), comment that ‘there seems to be an unbridgeable gulf between everyday scribbling and great creative writing’, and therefore ‘asking authors and poets how they work just widens the gulf’. Alternatively, Suzanne Greenberg (2005: 125, emphasis original) says that she undertakes to grade students’ portfolios of creative work together with a ‘250–500 word typed essay that discusses both their development as writers over the course and how they chose the work to include in their portfolio’. While she considers herself ‘a process reader’ she feels she cannot ‘grade solely on process. The final product must figure in the course grade, or we are left in the untenable situation of awarding a mediocre writer with an A simply because he worked diligently all term long’ (Greenberg, 2005: 126). In this way, Greenberg identifies what Sharples likewise struggles to reconcile. Neither suggests that he or she has overcome the dilemma of weighting an assessment of process or product; both recognise something along the lines that Sharples (1999: 128) describes in saying ‘a writer is a member of a community of practice’.

With the community in mind, it is sometimes said that things learned in creative writing courses – that enhanced knowledge about creativity, the greater understanding of the forms and functions of texts, those choices in mode of communication – can ‘transfer’ out of the learning creative writing into other parts of life. Transferrable skills are seen by some as part of recognition of the importance of what is learned when learning to write creatively. Terry Gifford (2002: 45), writing about teaching what he calls environmental creative writing, talks about creative writing classes teaching ‘environmental awareness’. In academic transferability, Patrick Bizzaro (2013: 171) suggests that his interest is:

not in how philosophy, history, science and other subjects might be used in a creative writing classroom, but in how creative writing might be taught in philosophy, history, science and other academic courses to help future professionals in those fields better describe new discoveries.

Others find the notion of transferability to be, at best, a distraction from teaching creative writing in order that students should learn to write such things as poems, short stories, novels, and scripts.

Practically, most undergraduate creative writing programmes are constructed according to genres of writing (the novel writing class, the poetry writing class, etc.). Alternatives exist – classes in narrative, classes in storytelling, classes in imagery or the sound of poetry – but these are less frequently seen. At graduate level in the United States, the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree has for many years been predominant. It is the spiritual home of the creative writing workshop, the most well known of formal creative writing classes. The MFA is also considered to be a ‘studio’ degree, much like other MFA degrees in fields such as drama, fine art, and filmmaking.

The creative writing workshop has generated a great deal of pedagogic discussion, mostly in the United States, from that concerned with the social dynamics of the workshop to that concerned with productive workshop topics and foci. Commentators have sometimes imagined its demise or considerable reinvention. Stephanie Vanderslice (2011: 3) comments in the opening of her Rethinking Creative Writing in Higher Education: Programs and Practices
that Work} that the contemporary world requires ‘a host of new knowledge and skills from
the aspiring writer that a general creative writing workshop cannot possibly contain’, while
Dianne Donnelly (2010: 2), in Does the Writing Workshop Still Work?, proposes that ‘there
is significant interest in more radical openness and re-envisioning of the workshop model’. Nevertheless, the workshop idea, as un-radicalised or ‘traditional’ (Vanderslice, 2011: 6) as it might often be, continues to be a primary site of creative writing education, and is declared particularly so in the United States, where its association with the notion of creative writing being a studio art is clearest. A studio, after all, involves some kind of workspace in which creative work is produced.

‘The act of workshopping – the sharing of written work, the offering of comments, and the receiving of critique – can be extraordinarily difficult for students’, writes Anna
Leahy (2010: 69), revealing key aspects of the operation of the creative writing workshop.
Jeri Kroll (2013: 103), alternatively, imagines in a declared metaphoric exploration ‘creative
writing in the university as an experimental site’, and comments in this exploratory
work that ‘just as biology students understand basic laboratory procedures, the writing
students in my scenario understand how workshops function’ (Kroll, 2013: 107). Kevin
Writing, suggests that ‘creative writing is recognized partly through assertions of its pre
sence and partly through certain contrived contexts such as workshops, “creative writing”
courses, community writing groups’. His comment here is referring to the nature of the
workshop as a kind of collaborative space and to his consideration of how this might relate
to notions of individual authorship.

Current contributions and research

Relatively recently, there has been discussion of the possibilities of developing the field of
‘creative writing studies’ in which the critical perspectives, theoretical underpinning, and
general reasoning relating to creative writing mean that studying it, and considering its peda-
gogies, identifies it as a distinct field. Dianne Donnelly (2011: 4), in her book Establishing
Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline, makes a good case for this, suggesting
situating this field ‘shoulder-to-shoulder with literary studies and composition studies as a
pedagogically and programatically sound entity fully empowered in its own identity and
scholarship’. She argues that ‘creative writing and creative writing studies are two distinct
enterprises’ (Donnelly, 2011: 2).

Regardless of the strength of her argument, Donnelly’s statement might not gain global
support. Although the term ‘creative writing studies’ has been used in countries such as
the United Kingdom – and I have personally used it as a title of a book co-edited with Jeri
Kroll, although in a slightly different way from how Donnelly uses it (Harper & Kroll,
2008) – the separation of creative writing from the study of English literature or English
studies has no parallel example in the United Kingdom, to take one instance, owing to the
absence of departments of composition. Creative writing therefore does not have, in the
United Kingdom, the peers in ‘literary studies and composition studies’ (Donnelly, 2011: 4)
on which it might build that suggested ‘shoulder-to-shoulder’ relationship.

Pointing to differing national histories again here is not merely intended to draw attention
to differences in course and degree structures, which in any teaching reflect prevailing
educational philosophies, but to identify a primary reason why what constitutes a current
contribution to debate in creative writing pedagogy, to creative writing research, and to
exploring topics in the discipline of creative writing so often varies according to location. In
short, national pedagogic histories currently play significant definitional roles. A case study of papers published in the international creative writing journal *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* over the past decade reveals elements of how this has influenced discussion.

In the second issue of *New Writing* (2004) 1(2), Amanda Boulter (2004: 134) of the University of Winchester, in ‘Assessing the criteria: An argument for creative writing theory’, suggests going beyond formalist paradigms and developing new theories of creative writing’s engagement with the world. In ‘The “problem” of creative writing: Using grading rubrics based on narrative theory as solution’, published in *New Writing* (2008) 5(3), Alicita Rodriguez (2008: 167), teaching at the Western State College of Colorado, talks instead about debunking ‘the fallacy of expressivism’ to challenge ‘the myth of automatic writing’. Both authors wish to redefine how creative writing process and creative writing end product are discussed; however, Boulter looks to reassess literary theoretical positions, while Rodriguez wishes to challenge the grading of students’ work, suggesting incorporating more formal narrative theory in grading techniques.

In *New Writing* (2010) 7(1), Robert L. Lively (2010: 35) argues, in ‘Rhetoric’s stepchildren: Ancient rhetoric and modern creative writing’, for the connecting of ‘modern issues in creative writing pedagogy with the ancient theories of rhetoric’. Specifically, he aims to engage with ancient rhetorical concepts of *tribe* (natural ability), *techne* (art or craft), and *empeiria* (learning by doing), and to relate these to theorising about how to teach creative writing. In their article, ‘Excursions into new territory: Fictocriticism and undergraduate writing’, in *New Writing* (2011) 8(1), Donna Maree Hancox and Vivienne Muller (2011: 147) of the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane Australia explore fictocriticism, ‘a term that first emerged in the Australia academy in the 1990s by way of French feminist interest in a new kind of writing defiant of phallocentrism’. They further describe fictocriticism ‘as a form of writing continues to make a home in the academy, particularly as an exciting and challenging form for scholars, writers and increasingly post-graduate students in Creative writing, Literary Studies and Cultural Studies’ (Hancox & Muller, 2011: 147).

Finally, in *New Writing* (2013) 10(1), Vida L. Midgelow (2013: 3) of the University of Northampton is concerned, in ‘Sensualities: Experiencing/dancing/writing’, with the ‘interaction between writing and improvisational dancing to describe a methodology for an embodied, sensual and experiential mode of writing/dancing in which the boundaries between these two disciplines are blurred’. In the same issue, ‘The recipe for novelty: Using bilingualism and indigenous literary genres in an advanced level L2 creative writing context in Pakistan’, by Asma Mansoor (2013) of the International Islamic University of Islamabad, Pakistan, has a subject that will be obvious from the title, while in *New Writing* (2013) 10(2), Nigel McLoughlin (2013: 219) of the University of Gloucestershire outlines, in ‘Negative polarity in Eavan Boland’s “The Famine Road”’, a ‘cognitive stylistic framework to identify and analyse the pattern of negation in the poem “The Famine Road” by Eavan Boland’.

These examples represent some aspects of the current critical investigation of creative writing and the teaching of creative writing. At this point in the history of the teaching of creative writing in higher education, critical difference rather than critical pre-eminence prevails, the reason being that the differing national traditions define levels of national, if not international, significance of any critical work. Crossovers between nations occur – and certainly the work of Rodriguez, or Lively, or McLoughlin, for example, would find a readership outside their national arenas. But each of these examples is informed by prevailing national conditions.

*New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* has had some advantage in the past decade in highlighting the international plainly in its...
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title and its outlook – but only in serving to offer a platform for current difference. Additionally, a journal or magazine is published by each of the largely national creative writing organisations focusing on creative writing teaching: the American Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), which is by far the largest of such organisations in the world, publishes The Writers’ Chronicle; the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) in the United Kingdom publishes Writing in Education; and the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) publishes TEXT. These journals publish work largely, but not solely, from the national arenas.

Together with the independent journal New Writing, the focus and publications of these organisations have assisted in supporting, as well as defining, critical work undertaken in the field over the past quarter of a century or so. More recent organisations, such as the European Association of Creative Writing Programmes (EACWP), with institutional members in a number of European countries including the United Kingdom, and the Canadian Creative Writers and Writing Programs (CCWWP), formed as recently as 2010, are making their contributions now to both national and, increasingly, international exchange on questions of what critical work might be undertaken with regard to creative writing and the teaching of creative writing.

Main research methods

In the United States, with the expression ‘research and creative activities’ or its close equivalents being a common description of types of undertaking in universities and colleges, definitions of research often talk about ‘testing’ or ‘evaluation’ and making a contribution to ‘generalisable knowledge’. Investigating creative writing and the teaching of creative writing does not fall easily within these American definitions. Some American universities do include creative practice within such a research definition; however, in the United States, the critical apparatus applied to understanding creative writing, and how to teach it, is most often drawn from the field of literary studies, which is considered a cognate, but appropriately critically informed research field. Drawing on the field of literary studies, biographical and textual analysis predominate when considering creative writing itself, and such activities as close reading and comparative cultural investigations, genre studies, or situating of creative writing styles and content in historical context. When considering creative writing teaching, action research drawing on an ethnographic sense of a ‘community of practice’ prevails.

Joyce Carol Oates (1997: 7), well known as a creative writer, but also long-time Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at Princeton University, writes:

The other writers in the workshop take on, for the duration of the workshop, roles as editors, too: it’s our task to work meticulously with the material given us, and to contribute all that we possibly can to improving it.

In this vein, research methods might be said to be individual and group experiential exchanges, conducted in relation to content, form, and structure, and modes of expression, and explored according to the situation that a creative writer faces when writing a particular piece of work.

The contribution additionally of those in the discipline of composition studies in the United States has already been noted and the emergence of the idea of creating a field called creative writing studies is one interpretation of how those in composition, and perhaps those
also in English, might contribute to research in creative writing. Tim Mayers (2009: 218) writes: ‘Creative writing studies, on the other hand, is a still-emerging enterprise that has been set in motion by some of the problems and internal contradictions of creative writing. Creative writing studies is a field of scholarly inquiry and research.’ Further, writing in US journal College Composition and Communication in an article entitled ‘The place of creative writing in composition studies’, Douglas Hesse (2010: 36) suggests that ‘there is also the relative absence of theoretical/pedagogical writing about creative writing, especially by writers themselves in any venue, let alone in composition journals’. He concludes by suggesting that ‘composition studies unilaterally explore the place of creative writing – of creative composing – in teaching, in scholarship, and in our expanded sense of ourselves as text makers’ (Hesse, 2010: 36).

In both the United Kingdom and Australia, researching creative writing has incorporated research through creative writing. Whether in terms of creative writing or in the teaching of creative writing, the now-common term ‘practice-led research’ has informed ideas of what research in the field constitutes in these countries. Major funders of research such as the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the United Kingdom’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) have considered creative writing practice as research, and thus funded projects about creative writing and involving creative writing.

Research methods in countries such as these, where practice-led research has been ascendant since the late 1980s, have also drawn from literary studies, and biographical and textual analysis, undertaking close reading, comparative cultural investigations, and genre studies, or situating creative writing styles and content in historical context. However, a greater range of methodological choices emerge because, unlike in the United States, undertaking creative writing is more widely seen as a research practice. Differences of emphasis have created some international student movement too, particularly where graduate students have sought out support for alternative research methodologies. Kerry Spencer (2013: 79, emphasis original), an American young adult fiction writer who teaches creative writing at Brigham Young University, Utah, but who undertook her PhD in creative writing in the United Kingdom, comments: ‘If creative writers are so willing to engage in non-traditional research for their creative works, why be so hesitant to try new modes of research when we are researching about creative writing?’

Practically, the methodological range associated with creative writing research in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia can include the actions of drafting and redrafting, revising, editing, reading, annotating, and/or graphically depicting (for example doodles, sketches, charts). Beyond modes of literary analysis, it can involve modelling, a consideration of other creative writers’ works, or the speculative consideration of technique or of the creative writer’s own decision-making. Interviewing or surveying might occur, as observation or action research, in or outside a classroom. A creative writer might re-examine his or her previous works in light of new knowledge about practice, genre, or the physical appearance of the end results. There might be workshopping undertaken – which, in the United States, would not be defined as a research activity – whereby the creative writer has access to peers whose opinions she or he values. A comparative study might occur, a creative writer comparing his or her actions and results with other human practices, artistic or otherwise, and this could extend to comparisons of design, shape, style, structure, or form (Harper, 2008: 163).

Teachers of creative writing in higher education in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia investigate their field through methods such as these, and there are many nuances and individual interpretations. In essence, such a perspective can
be summarised in the idea that a creative writer will, and should, draw from what best suits a given writing situation. This is what I have called the creation of ‘situational knowledge’ (Harper, 2013: 284). *Situational knowledge* provides solutions to problems or needs relating to writerly actions. That knowledge might relate to content, structure, voice, or any other writing-related issue. Each instance in which situational knowledge is needed provides a learning opportunity, and it is these learning opportunities that those teaching creative writing aim to harness.

**Recommendations for practice**

The teaching of creative writing has often been disadvantaged by being absorbed into other things, rather than treated as an activity in its own right. In particular, the recognition of creative writing as a distinct field of human endeavour has not always been supported or pursued because it was seen to be part of the study of literature or because the critical apparatus applied to it was seen to most appropriately be drawn from the study of literature. Alternatively, the teaching of creative writing has been advantaged by our ability to draw from other avenues of teaching to produce critical insights, such as those provided by the study of literature, and by using the critical apparatus used in the study of cognate areas of human knowledge, we have been able to build up a better understanding of the influences and results of writing creatively. These alternative points of view are presented because each has some validity and both views have their supporters.

My recommendation for understanding and pursuing the teaching of creative writing is to begin by recognising that creative writing is human action, informed by varieties of knowledge, and that any teaching must therefore locate itself in the interaction between creative practice and critical understanding. Our creative practices are determined by cultural influences, but also are distinctively individual, a combination of our individual psychology, history, and even physiology. Our critical understanding is drawn from a vast range of knowledge forms and types – and it is wrong to suggest that only knowledge of literature can inform a creative writer or the teaching of creative writing. Whether writing novel or poem, screenplay or libretto, story for computer game or short story for a book, a creative writer will draw on those avenues of knowledge and understanding that best inform their practice. Some of this knowledge will be knowledge of similar work, or the understanding of particular forms, but just as importantly a creative writer will draw on form and content knowledge that ranges right across the spectrum of human engagement with life. A creative writer will draw from what best suits the writing situation – that is, will form ‘situational knowledge’ (Harper, 2013: 284). Each instance in which situational knowledge is needed provides a learning opportunity, and it is these learning opportunities that those teaching creative writing can harness.

A creative writer seeking to structure a novel might be assisted by exposure to other novels, successful and/or unsuccessful work that can provide a textual model, but he or she might just as likely be informed by considering the structure of a building, of a train and its carriages, by using a mathematical analogy, or by imagining a mechanism, or by considering the relationship between parts of a landscape. A writing situation arises and a creative writer deals with it in motion, fluidly accessing knowledge and understanding that, to him or her, best helps in dealing with that writing situation.

The creative writer who is capable of drawing on a number of potential solutions, applying his or her understanding, and being confident, or at least comfortable, with how good results might happen can be considered to have a high level of situational knowledge – whether that
knowledge has been acquired informally or whether it is part of what is today an increasingly wide range of formal courses or classes.

**Future directions**

In the post-industrial world in which we are living, in which knowledge and creativity are energetically exchanged for pleasure and/or profit, but also leisure time is far greater than in previous eras (at least in the developed world), participation in creative writing will continue to grow. With that in mind, creative writing teaching will continue to expand, and greater and stronger discussion of creative writing as a distinctive field of human practice and knowledge will occur.

It is likely that more creative writing will be taught by means of methods whereby students are not all in the same physical space. We see an expansion of this already in what are called low-residency courses (particularly MFAs). The physical bookstore is likely to disappear well before mid-century. The question of whether the paper book will survive is an interesting and poignant one for those currently teaching creative writing. Most likely, the paper book will remain an option for the delivery of works of creative writing — but other electronic options will continue to grow in importance for both readers and writers, and the opportunity for incorporating aspects of the visual and aural into creative writing texts will therefore become greater. Changes in the kinds of works produced will thus naturally occur, some older forms losing ground or entirely disappearing, and newer forms emerging that draw on the new digitally provided choices.

Partly because of the expansion of the teaching of creative writing, partly because the post-industrial world also involves a strong sense of personalisation of choice, and partly because we are living in an era in which we exchange our experiences (whether through social media or through wider avenues of travel and exposure to experiential choice), it is likely that the experience of engaging with a text produced by a creative writer will also increasingly incorporate a desire to engage with the actions that produced it. We see this already in the exchange of ‘works-in-progress’ in online communities of creative writers. Intriguingly, we have long seen this in the creative writing workshop in the discussion of drafts and the exchange of ideas about works that are not yet complete. Enhanced by new media, the opportunity to incorporate this kind of interaction into how we purchase works of creative writing seems sure to encourage more such exchange to occur, and with an increase in people who have undertaken some kind of formal creative writing education, the expectations and possibilities for this kind of interactive exchange also grow.

Teaching creative writing might best be seen as an activity with a considerable number of types and complexions. Certainly it has, and will have, importance in the training and development of people who find employment in one or more of the creative industries; but because creative writing combines individualism with cultural and social influences, and often encourages personal interpretation and expression, its teaching is often associated with self-expression and self-realisation. Finally, because undertaking creative writing involves the use and application of situational knowledge, its teaching will continue to be an important way in which we can explore how human beings come to understand the world, their lives, and the knowledge that informs them, as well as providing an avenue for applying such knowledge in the pursuit of an end goal — whether that goal is a completed text that will be released into the world or simply a personally satisfying creative exploration.
Teaching creative writing

Related topics
creativity in composition; creativity in second-language learning; discourses of creativity; literary narrative; literature and language teaching; poetry and poetics

Further reading

This book suggests how creative writing and the teaching of creative writing might appear in the near and not so near future.


If you are interested in what theory connected with creative writing might look like, this edited collection provides a multi-voiced exploration.


In this book, writers explore what research in, and through, creative writing can entail.


This book looks at gaps in conversations between creative writing and composition studies, especially relating to the discourse common in English departments, and suggesting the potential for what Mayers calls ‘craft criticism’.


Twenty-three essays provide evidence of what contributors found was happening, and what they believed was needed, in the teaching of creative writing at the end of the 1980s.

References


Wood, A. A. (1813 [1691–2]) *Athenae Oxonienses: An Exact History of All the Writers and Bishops Who Have Had Their Education in the University of Oxford – To Which Are Added the Fasti, or Annals of the Said University*, London: F. C. & J. Rivington.