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Afterword Disciplinarity and the Future of Creative Writing Studies

JOSEPH MOXLEY

Back in the early 1980s, I was fresh out of a master's program in creative writing and a doctoral program in composition and rhetoric. Having taken numerous writing workshops for the BA (Utah) and MA (SUNY Buffalo) in Creative Writing, I appreciated the flow – the give and take – of the writing workshop, yet I wondered why creative writing teachers didn't experiment with alternative pedagogical approaches, why my academic training included so little literature, particularly contemporary fiction. The standard approach of the writing workshop – the teacher leading a critique of a work while the author remained silent and the alpha students fought for the class' attention or teacher's approval – seemed like loads of fun to me yet ultimately weak if more than social entertainment was the goal. I yearned for training in specific genres of fiction, wanted to learn to conduct research for future fiction, and hoped to learn craft moves from modern literature. How could I best develop ideas for new work? What could I learn from the practices of successful novelists? Then, as now, creative writing pedagogy seemed limited 'to put raw pain on the page, with the only substantive critical questions asked being those concerning imagistic clarity' (Andrews, 2009: 248). In contrast, from my doctoral studies, I was inspired by writing process research, and I wondered why the creative writing faculty or RhetComp faculty didn't research the creative processes of established writers or research the efficacy of the workshop model. As a result, hoping to stimulate research and scholarship in the field of creative writing – and hoping to take the first step in my career – I edited *Creative Writing in America: Theory and Pedagogy* (1989c: 25). In this book (as well as a related essay in *The AWP Chronicle*), I argued 'the general segregation of creative

writing from literature and composition corrodes the development of a literary culture.' Ultimately, I was hoping the book would inspire more interdisciplinary work, more talk among faculty in creative writing and RhetComp:

Although the walls in English departments that separate creative writers, literature professors, literary critics, and composition scholars are not easily scaled, we must tear down the arbitrary boundaries and firmly establish professional writing programs that are informed by the dynamics of the creative process. After all, without theory for teaching writing, we have no compass to direct or evaluate our activities, no way to understand why some exercises succeed while others fail . . . In order to meet the myriad needs of writing students, we need to inform each other, rather than retreat from each other's disciplines. We are, after all, a family dedicated to language, creativity, self-expression, and critical thinking. Together, we carry the treasures of the humanities, the keys to the mind. We must remember that narrow-mindedness discourages that spirit of eagerness, of creative play, that is essential to creativity, learning, and development. Greater interdisciplinary communication among our related disciplines will invigorate our practices, our students, our culture. (Moxley, 1989c: 42–23).

At the time I was (as I'm sure you can tell from the above) extremely optimistic, and I opined that 'there is evidence that our discipline is preparing to undergo a paradigm shift, a period of self-reflexiveness in which we question our theories and practices' (Moxley, 1989b: xi). Now, over 20 years later, my belief in the need for greater collaboration among literature, creative writers and composition specialists remains resolute, yet I have a much stronger appreciation for the enduring power of the status quo. As an assistant professor I didn't have an understanding of how slow disciplines are to evolve. But now, as I look back on the limited scholarship in this area over the past two decades, I can see that contemporary creative writing theorists (Stephanie Vanderslice, Tim Mayers, D.G. Myers, Patrick Bizzaro) are faulting creative writing teachers for not reflecting on alternatives to the writing workshop method, for avoiding questions about creative writing theory and pedagogy, just as my colleagues (Wendy Bishop, Eve Shelnutt, Stephen Minot) and I did back in the 1980s. Here, for example, are three sample passages to illustrate the enduring nature of these critiques:

Moxley, 1989: [Q]uestions about teaching creative writing have been virtually ignored. At present, no debate rages in professional journals as to whether creative writing programs are providing students with necessary writing skills, knowledge of the composing process, or background in literature needed to write well. Although professional writers frequently have criticized the workshop method, few have recommended viable alternatives (1989a: xi).

Bizzaro, 2004: 'It might be an understatement to say that most teachers of creative writing are not particularly enthusiastic about inquiries into their classroom practices (and many still may feel such inquiries are meaningless ... the mere mention of *theory* or *praxis* sets off alarms in the brains of most creative writers' (p. 295).

Vanderslice, this volume: '[M]any creative teachers *still* do not avail themselves of the growing body of scholarship on the teaching of creative writing' (p. 4).

After 20 years of criticism, one wonders why MFA programs are still characterized as 'anti-intellectual' (Bizarro), 'anti-professional' (Cain), 'anti-academic' (Ritter), why the writing workshop method remains unrevised after 100 years (Bizarro). In response, today's creative writing theorists have offered a number of explanations. Kimberly Andrews (2009) thinks she knows the answer. She suggests, it seems to me, that the anti-intellectual, anti-professional stance comes down to laziness:

My own suspicion is that teaching lore – this set of mystical principles, this idea that the only thing that matters is the raw (or slightly refined) product of the heart – is fundamentally *comforting*, because the handing-down of 'tried and true' writing tips and tricks is an endeavor requiring little maintenance: no pedagogical trends to follow, no debates to become embroiled in, and, fundamentally, no critics (well, except some of us, and only recently) knocking on the classroom door. Teaching lore further comforts creative writers who are intimidated by the enormous body of literature and criticism that encircles them; it is much easier to speak of the genius of creative writing, to say, like a bad infomercial, 'you, too, can cultivate this genius in yourself!' (p. 247)

As an alternative to the rather harsh criticism that creative writing teachers are lazy, Randall Albers suggests creative writing teachers ignore praxis and theory because they 'would rather spend that time writing their own work than taking on the extra reading, thinking, experimentation,

and training that new models would take' (qtd in Donnelly, 2010). Alternatively, Mary Ann Cain (2009) questions whether universities appreciate the anti-professional, anti-establishment persona of the creative artists because it can serve as a countermeasure, a gratuitous symbol of the gadfly for the otherwise entrepreneurial university. When it's the humanities, art for arts sake, then it lacks value except as a symbol for creativity, the symbol of Good Academic Housekeeping:

The corporate university values creative writing precisely insofar as it produces figures of freedom for the business-oriented, skilled laborers of the captive new class that it trains. We are thus figure-heads, beings of leisure, of no real use at all ... [I]t is no wonder that creative writers are loathe to examine the field in detail (Andrews, 2009: 251)

Gerald Graff (2009) has yet another explanation for the lack of rigor in creative writing programs. He points to the general dysfunctional nature of English departments, and suggests the notion of an 'English Department' is a 'euphemism or polite fiction,' (p. 273) that the 'separatist dynamics of the university' (p. 275) are to blame, that not only do faculty across programs fail to communicate, but that faculty within programs are too self-centered to do more than swap stories about kids' sports teams:

I've been teaching for more than forty years and have never heard of an English department meeting to discuss the philosophical relationship between its creative writing program and the 'regular' literature program. (p. 271)

But not only is there little communication *between* creative writing and literature (or between linguistics and minority literatures), there is also little communication *within* these programs, which is a way of saying that there's a certain element of wishful thinking in our very use of the word 'program' – which rarely means anything more than a set of unconnected courses that happen to be on roughly the same topic. (p. 273)

Now, looking back 20 years, I realize my personal experience supports Graff's argument as opposed to the argument that solipsistic self interest or laziness reinforces the lack of rigor in creative writing programs when it comes to questions of praxis or theory. As I try to account for why I didn't follow up on *Creative Writing in America* with additional research and theory, numerous excuses come to mind, particularly my efforts to help build a doctorate program in Rhetoric and Composition. Plus, there

was the goal of seeking tenure. Then full professor. And then, somewhere along the line I became someone else. I no longer had reams of rejections from *The New Yorker*, SAR Agents, or top publishing firms. Instead, I found myself writing academic essays in composition and rhetoric, various academic books, and directing dissertations in RhetComp. Looking back, I can see the bread crumbs leading away from who I used to be, that is, a writer with one foot in creative writing and a scholar with the other foot in RhetComp.

Perhaps, even back in the 1980s, when my department chair at the time (a poet) warned me that the NCTE collection would not count in my tenure package because it wasn't firmly grounded in Composition Studies, I should have had a greater appreciation for the constraining force of the existing faculty reward system. 'You can't earn tenure by conducting research in creative writing,' he warned. A large, formidable man, he scowled at me and muttered, 'Focus on composition or pack your bags!' Looking back on these more rigid times before English departments rebranded themselves as departments of cultural studies, before the world was a text, I realize he meant the best for me. Then as now the pursuit of new knowledge is most reliably found by pursuing academic specialization. Hired and tenured because they can write the publishable poem, short story or novel, creative writing stars perpetuate their standards, offering narrow reading lists, praising the same top-tier publishers, and leading the same writing workshops – the workshops with the authoritative teacher directing the conversation, silencing the author from the discussion of the work, the politics of peer review, and the clichéd workshop piece. This is good work if you can get it: roll into class, have a student or two read work out loud, and then direct a discussion about the submissions, suggesting ways for the work to be improved. Otherwise, no homework; just free time to hone one's craft. In turn, composition faculties specialize in their discipline, conducting qualitative and quantitative research or theorizing works that can be published in RhetComp journals. When tenure or academic promotion is the goal, interdisciplinarity remains the exception to the rule. Then, as now, poets are tenured for poetry; creative writers, for fiction; and rhetoric and composition faculty, for research and scholarship. To break this cycle and question the dominance of senior faculties and the publishing processes of research universities, younger faculties would need to reject their training and reject the values of the senior faculty who will judge their tenure cases. Alternatively, senior faculties would need to embrace new values and standards for academic promotion. Morton

Winston (1995) has written eloquently on the ways the academic reward system reinforces the status quo:

The power that the disciplinary elites exercise within their academic communities depends essentially on their ability to perform 'certification function.' According to the dominant ethos, since only members of these elites can authoritatively lay claim to being real 'experts,' only they possess the authority to certify what counts as knowledge. Disciplinary elites use their control over epistemic certification to maintain their hegemony within the academy by deciding which practitioners will be certified as 'professional experts,' whose works will be published, and, what other activities of professors will be rewarded within academic institutions. (p. 55)

In addition to the comfort of story swapping around the workshop text, the symbolic value of hosting a few creative writers on staff, and the confining nature of the academic reward systems, there are other pressures that support the status quo. Popularity is certainly a factor. While 40 years ago there were only about 40 programs in creative writing registered with the Associated Writing Programs, now there are over 400 programs to choose from, including MA, MFA, and PhD options (Bryne, 2009). Perhaps in response to postmodernism, neocolonialism, and every increasing layers of jargon and theory that characterize modern scholarship in literature – or maybe it's just the small size of the writing class – people love workshoping poems, fiction, and creative nonfiction. While English departments have been crushed since the 1960s by diminishing enrollments – down 18% overall in contrast to disciplines such as communication that have grown exponentially (Modern Language Association, 2009) – other than service courses like first-year composition, creative writing programs have been the darlings of the department.

Given growing enrollments in creative writing programs, the self-gratification of our personal efforts to craft fiction or poems, and the rigidity and conservatism of the scholarly reward system, can we identify any pressures that could motivate creative writing faculty to seek alternatives to the writing workshop? In brief, do I still believe 'our discipline is preparing to undergo a paradigm shift, a period of self-reflexiveness in which we question our theories and practices?' (Moxley, 1989b: xi).

Emphatically yes.

On the surface creative writing programs may be evolving at a pace that makes plate tectonics seem positively speedy, yet deep beneath the surface, subduction is at work. The steady pressure of four disciplines – Creative Writing, RhetComp, Literature, and Professional and Technical

Writing – grinding away against one another will surely result in eruptions here and there, transforming the local ecologies, if not the planet. Eventually, I'm certain that the ecologies of whole universities will be transformed, resulting in interdisciplinary programs that will be remarkably different from the staid authoritarian writing workshop of our grandparents. While, academic time may not take the eons of geologic time, eventually – if not in the next 20 years – we can expect creative writing programs to embrace pedagogy, research, and theory. Below, I elaborate on some of the factors that are likely to motivate these innovations:

- (1) Consensus seems to be building in published literature that the MFA is not a terminal degree except for the occasional well-published writer, that MFA programs don't properly prepare students to be creative writing teachers or theorists, that the PhD is a superior alternative given that most creative writing students will fail to become published poets or novelists. More specifically, critics now seem to agree that a new discipline is evolving: Creative Writing Studies. Originally articulated by Tim Mayers as a compromise move, the idea that we should divide the discipline of creative writing into two models – the traditional **MFA Model** (which can continue to ignore praxis and theory and focus on the studio approach) – and the **Creative Writing Studies PhD Model** (which can be more interdisciplinary and academically rigorous) – is gaining widespread support (Ritter, Mayers, Bizzaro, Donnelly).

So what would creative writing studies look like? As Patrick Bizzaro has suggested, creative writing studies could include coursework in research methods from composition and rhetoric (especially qualitative methods) and courses in historiography to better prepare students for historical fiction. Programs in creative writing studies could also have teaching training courses for faculty. In addition, these programs could add courses in Intellectual Property, Social Networking Systems, Desktop Design, and New Media. As Dianne Donnelly reports in the introduction to this book, important new media work is being pioneered by a number of institutions, including the University of Massachusetts Amherst, George Mason University, Texas A & M, College at Santa Fe, Adelphi University.

- (2) As suggested by many of the chapters in this book (see Donnelly, Bizzaro, Abbott, Haake, Perry, Wilson), the hegemony of the traditional writers' workshop is under attack as creative writing teachers develop new pedagogical approaches such as courses that combine

reading literature and criticism with the workshop, courses that dedicate classroom time to listening to recordings and YouTube videos of poets reading, and courses that work with drama students to perform students' works.

- (3) At the undergraduate level, many creative writing courses fall under the auspices of General Education programs. Given the move toward accountability and outcomes assessment efforts in response to external accrediting agencies such as SACs, faculty may be inspired to develop more fine-tuned outcomes than 'students will write publishable fiction and poetry.' Indeed, the MLA's 2009 'Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature' calls for 'empirical research to assess the successes and shortcomings of the program' (2009: 2). Once we truly quantify success on the part of students – perhaps, for example by measuring their publications – we will have important evidence that can guide our writing programs.
- (4) Technology matters. Finally, and to my mind most importantly, we would need to have blinders on not to notice the major changes that are redefining writing and reading practices. Just as Shakespeare was a pioneer in drama, so will tomorrow's creative writing students be pioneers in new media. Interactive gaming environments, video, wiki poems, and wiki fiction, hypertextual texts – these are the new genres that we should be teaching. Organizations like the Electronic Literature Organization (<http://eliterature.org/>), the Interactive Fiction Archive (<http://www.ifarchive.org/>), and the ACM Conference on Hypertext and Hypermedia (<http://www.interaction-design.org/references/conferences/series/Acm-conference-on-hypertext-and-hypermedia.html>) provide students with extraordinarily large audiences. If impact is a chief measure of success, then we can expect our students to seek access to the millions of online users as opposed to the one hundred or so people who might read an obscure literary print journal published by a university. Eventually, innovative English departments will develop their own interactive writing environments to support the excellent works of their students. With students leading the way our disciplinary identity will be substantively revised. It's just going to take a little time.

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