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Am I no longer a writer? 'Universal' tenets and the writing/teaching self

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Abstract

The tension between the artist finding their own unique voice and the use of other artists as exemplars which, effectively, negates the notion of unique-ness and relies on rules and general tenets, is highly evident in the teaching of emerging writers in university creative writing programmes. This paper seeks to unpack elements of this tension by considering the ways in which teaching identities intersect with pedagogical practice, particularly around the rules which govern writing schedules and engagement with creative content making. I consider two opposing notions of creative practice – the strict, worker-like ideal versus Muse-driven, inspired artistry – to challenge some of the “self-evident” tools of creative writing teaching. In particular, I look at the ubiquitous nature of the “write every day” and “keep a journal” mantras which have permeated both my student and teaching experiences in the academy. I argue that if we acknowledge creative writing practices as ‘personal and cultural’ (Harper, 79) then we must be wary, as creative writing instructors, of insisting on fixed notions of what a writer looks like.

Keywords: creativity, Muse, industry, inspiration

Am I No Longer A Writer? “Universal” tenants and the writing/teaching self

Rather than write about what you know, you told us, write about what you *see*. Assume that you know very little and that you’ll never know much until you learn how to see. Keep a notebook to record things you see, for example when you’re out in the street.

The Friend, Sigrid Nunez (53)

The tension between the artist finding their own unique voice and the use of other artists as exemplars which, effectively, negates the notion of unique-ness and relies on rules and general tenets, is highly evident in the teaching of emerging writers in university creative writing programmes. On the one hand, the undergraduate student writer is encouraged to closely excavate their lived experience, to consider their own individual history and self – the old adage of “write what you know” – and to search for an original way of speaking. On the other hand, they are provided with both primary material and quotes and advice from those who have gone before, with the concomitant belief that there is a (though, admittedly, elusive) map to be followed which will lead to writing “success”. As Elizabeth Forbes points out, drawing on Taylor and Littleton’s *Contemporary Identities of Creativity and Creative Work*: ‘an inherent tension is identified between recognition and acceptance on the one hand and singularity on the other’ (Forbes, 266). This paper seeks to consider this tension through interrogation of two very common pieces of advice given to young writers: “write every day” and “keep a journal”. I want to reflect on what kind of ideas of creative practice these seemingly innocuous pieces of advice rely upon, particularly focusing in on classed and gendered notions of writing practice, and how basic rules of creativity set up models which are neither universal nor ahistorical and which may privilege a particular vision of the writer. In the first instance, I want to look closely at the student writer and the journey they might wish to undertake via a creative writing programme and then consider how this intersects

with the ways in which creative writing teachers form their own creative identities and take them into the classroom.

Who is the student writer?

Forbes in 'Multiple Facets of the Emerging Writer' acknowledges the ways in which 'being a writer is hard-won, dynamic and fragile' (266) and, through interviews with aspiring MA students and those undertaking mentorships, creates a model of intersecting versions of the writer: maker, artist, creator and performer. Maker 'is about doing, producing words, which also means giving time and physical space to writing'; Artist 'reflects the deeper impact of writing on the writer's life ... where doing meets being'; Creator 'brings the inner world and vision into reality through the writing, resulting in the work' and Performer 'represents the writer's identity externally to the world' (270-272). This model provides a means by which teachers of creative writing might speak to, and interrogate meaningfully, the multiplicity of the authorial identity and consider where the student writer sits amongst these models.

Looking closely at the category of 'maker', Forbes notices that

... the act of writing is the foundation for any sense of self-identity as a writer. ... It also appears to be the facet which writers will most readily acknowledge, finding it less daunting or presumptuous to say that *they write* than to ascribe to themselves the identity of 'writer'. (my italics, 270-271)

Susan Day, in her interviews of four aspiring creative writers, also comes to the conclusion that the process of writing itself is that which creates the identity. She cites Gruber's (1988) relation to the task of creation to self-concept: 'the set of tasks taken as a whole constitute a large part of the ego: To be oneself one must do these things; to do these things one must be oneself' (38). This aligns with the notion that to be a real writer you must *need* to write, no

matter if your output results in publication or not. Forbes also focuses on the individual's desire for self-expression – with many of her interviewees saying that writing give their lives meaning – zeroing in on the writer as maker, artist and creator, with little thought as yet given to the performative elements needed once publication has been achieved. Such a distinction draws our attention to the fact the focus of the emerging writer is different from the established writer (although this is not to say the published writer has moved through these stages and can now enjoy a confirmed identity as 'creator').

Forbes further contends that 'singularity is born of the unique qualities and experiences of the writer and is bound up with the whole sense of self' (266). Again, the focus begins on the individual and their lived experiences contributing to their unique sense of self. Here, the need for a highly functioning sense of self is fraught with paradox: many writer biographies emphasise their sense of being an outsider – lonely childhoods or traumatic experiences which drive the writer to the world of books where solace is found and where subsequent creation enables an enactment of a different self – at the same time as the professional, published writer must be sure of their current intact identity, able to articulate what their work is about and able to provide a description of a coherent writing process that can be duplicated by others. Many published writers will admit to a feeling that each new project needs a re-learning, that writing one novel does not necessarily guarantee the ability to write another, that the process is often difficult to articulate in terms which make sense to anyone else but themselves. This might veer dangerously into the realm of 'can writing really be taught at all?' which is not a question I want to debate.

Rather, let us return to the idea of what is helpful to speak about when it comes to providing advice to the emerging writer. If ‘to write’ is different from being an Artist and a Creator, then I would argue the transition from one to the other is often¹ the journey student Makers are undertaking via university creative writing programmes. They are able to write, but they are yet to treat themselves, and their work, as ‘art’ or ‘creation’ or able to embrace an identity as ‘writer’. As Kevin Brophy points out ‘many students have the desire to do it but not the habit, not the compulsion, not the identification with themselves as writer’ (60). What, then, enables this transition to identification as Artist and Creator? What elements of teaching are key to the student’s ability to embrace the role of writer?

Rubble versus Brick

In March 2019, I attended a lecture by Australian writer, Maxine Beneba Clarke. Beneba Clarke is a widely published Australian writer of Afro-Caribbean descent who was invited as a guest lecturer for the module of ‘Creative Nonfiction’ within the first year course ‘Creative Writing: Ideas and Practice’, an introductory, and compulsory, course run as part of the creative writing programme at the University of Melbourne. Beneba Clarke’s memoir, *The Hate Race* (2016), had been critically acclaimed and her address focused on her own writing practices and strategies of producing the genre. At the end of the lecture, a standard question and answer session was initiated in which one student asked the also, perhaps, standard question: ‘what is your writing schedule?’ Beneba Clarke’s answer was the following:

I don’t write as much you think I would. I know I seem quite prolific but I have two kids, I’m a single parent, I also teach and write for a paper to pay my rent so I write

¹ I say ‘often’ because it must be acknowledged that some creative writing undergraduate students are already professional writers who have, for different reasons, returned to the academy.

when I can ... I'm not precious at all about my writing time ... I know that some writers can only work when they have a solid block of six hours that they can write in but that's just not a reality for me, it's kinda in amongst the rubble of life.

A month early, Wayne Macauley, also a successful Australian writer, was asked the same question – whether by the same student or not, I cannot recall – and this was his answer:

I try to write every day, five days a week, sometimes six. I try to do three or four hours every day, that's my schedule, it has been for years and years ... even if it's a bad day I just continue to write badly. That's recommended ... I do write every day, that's critical ... critical ... always, in conjunction, with any project I'm working on, I am keeping a journal ... You should all be keeping some journal or notebook of some kind ... I've kept a journal all my writing life.

The contrast here is obvious. One writer admits she must find time amongst 'the rubble of life', while the other insists writing every day is 'critical'. Whilst Macauley has a schedule he adheres to faithfully, Beneba Clarke scrambles through, often writing 'on the backs of receipts' if there is no notebook to hand. Both answers contain traces of different artistic identities: on the one hand, the loose, flowing, perhaps Muse-driven notion of scrambling to ensure creative practice is fitted into the rest of life, on the other hand, the worker-man notion of persistence and discipline, where nothing is left to chance. The most obvious difference here can be extrapolated from gender roles – feminist research has clearly shown the difficulty many female-identifying writers have in finding time and space to undertake their profession – but I am more curious about the way in which such varying answers presents student writers with two very different models of creativity, given without a frame of reference that acknowledges the specific nature of the writer identity from which it arises.

Who is the teacher?

In contrast to the student, the creative writing teacher – whether it be a lecturer, a guest lecturer or a tutor – has, generally, moved into the category of Artist or Creator, with the source of their knowledge coming from the notion of experience and expertise. Whilst many models of education do not require the teacher to have insider experience of the ideas being taught, creative writing pedagogy in higher institutions generally privileges a certain level of publication success or, at the very least, movement towards the completion of a relevant postgraduate degree. Drawing on the American model, Rebecca Manery identifies five broad categories of pedagogic identity in teachers of creative writing: ‘Expert Practitioner, Facilitator, Change Agent, Co-Constructor of Knowledge, and Vocational Coach’ (208). She breaks down the ‘Expert Practitioner’ into three subtypes: ‘Famous Author’, ‘Master Craftsperson’ and ‘Teacher/Artist’ and looks at the way in which each of these identities will focus on different types of values in their teaching practice. For example, she contends, the Famous Author may value ‘talent’ much more highly than the ‘Vocational Coach’ whose primary value will be ‘marketability’ (209-210). Manery acknowledges that these categorical divisions might be somewhat too formulaic, but they do offer a way to consider how advice or models of creativity are administered and what impact it may have on the student transition from Maker to Artist and Creator. They beg the question: what identity has the teacher brought to the classroom and how does it inform notions of creativity they may consider to be universal or natural, rather than genre-specific² and historically burdened?

² The difference between the teaching of fiction and screenwriting is an easy example to provide here. As pointed out to me by Dr Radha O’Meara, a senior lecturer at the University of Melbourne, the advice to “write every day” is never given to screenwriters. Although there is an obvious need for a strong work ethic, the notion of writing daily is not a mantra given to those writing for the screen. Nor, during my time as a playwright and dramaturg in professional theatre, did I ever hear it given to playwrights.

As Anna Leahy notes in *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project*, teachers of creative writing negotiate constantly with the question of authority as they continually explore ‘who has permission to do what, who has which rights in the creative and academic processes, how ideas and individuals are privileged, who has control in the creative writing classroom and how all these are in flux’ (ix). Here, I would argue that authority is intrinsically tied up with identity. That is, what the teacher themselves has as *their* model of creativity and what current writing practice they are able to undertake, comes into the classroom with them, whether they are aware of it or not.

Write-Every-Day/Keep-A-Journal

Although there are probably few dedicated creative writing teachers who will administer ideas with the “my way or the by way” mode of delivery, the ubiquitous nature of the “write every day” and “keep a journal” mantras have permeated both my student and teaching experiences in the university. Through six years of postgraduate study and five years teaching in the academy I have heard these pieces of advice administered at least twice, if not more, each semester, primarily delivered by guest lecturers who would fall into Marney’s category of ‘Expert Practitioner’³. Perplexed students often come to tutorials with a guilty expression on their faces, concerned that their schedules – often full of studies, work and family commitments – do not allow for the habitual space and time to write creatively. For these undergraduates who plan to major in the discipline, there is sometimes a genuine stress felt about their inability to adhere to the everyday habit. Throughout my own postgraduate

³ In relation to the examples referred to earlier, Maxine Beneba Clark would classify as ‘Expert Practitioner’ whilst Wayne Macauley, who also tutored in the course, would, I believe, fall into the category of ‘Teacher/Artist’.

creative writing degree, I took the “write every day” mantra so closely to heart I struggled with depression and anxiety about lost hours not dedicated to my writing.

And this is not only advice administered within the academy. In *The Writing Experiment: Strategies for Innovative Creative Writing*, Hazel Smith answers the frequently asked question ‘do I have to have special qualities to be a writer?’ in the following way:

The main special qualities writers much have are perseverance, motivation, the willingness to search for methods which suit them, energy to push themselves out of their own comfort zones and avid reading habits. Failure to produce creative work is often due more to lack of stamina or insufficient commitment to the process, than a paucity of talent. (ix)

Here are the similar tenets which favour the brick-upon-brick approach, with words which I would argue are overwhelmingly masculine: ‘perseverance’, ‘methods’, ‘energy’, ‘stamina’, ‘commitment’.

Running alongside the “write every day” rule is the similarly repeated advice to “keep a journal”. During my Masters course in Creative Writing one of the assigned assessment tasks was to keep a journal for the semester duration and submit it – up to a limited word count – at the end of the term. I remember undertaking this task with relish, writing daily entries full of observations, over-heard dialogue, quotes from what I was reading and expressions of writerly self-doubt. This, I now understand, was my first exercise in *performing* as a particular kind of writer, for in knowing the work would be read, and graded, by the ‘Famous Author’ who had set the task, a level of self-censorship and self-aggrandisement inevitably snuck in. What great literature could I show him I was reading? What well-wrought description of the sky

could I “spontaneously” compose? If, as Brophy, via George Steiner, contends, all teaching is an exercise in power relations, then the teacher-student relationship developed via this task was one in which a particular vision of the writer was being encouraged and it was, perhaps, this experience which has made me so suspicious of universal tenets of writing: ‘for inherent in learning is both submission to instruction and assertion of oneself against one’s teacher’ (Brophy, 57).

Currently, I do not keep a journal because the pockets of time where I can write must necessarily be dedicated to projects (such as this paper or my novels). Does this mean I am no longer a writer? There are days when I write nothing creatively, because I have children to taxi around and classes to prepare for. Does this mean I am no longer a writer?

Whilst I concede that these pieces of advice may seem harmless and some might argue they are self-evident – for what is a writer if they are not writing? – the notion that these are ‘critical’ to a writing identity stems, I would contend, from a particularly masculine and middle-class model of creativity. For who can dedicate hours to work that will not necessarily generate income? For who can lock themselves in their study for days at a time without concern for family or the running of a household? Virginia Woolf had two requirements for a woman to write fiction, not only the famous ‘room of her own’ but, also, money. In Sigrid Nunez’s novel *The Friend*, quoted at the beginning of this article, the narrator, who is a New York-based writer and teacher, goes on to reflect:

I stopped keeping any kind of notebook or journal a long time ago. These days what I seem to see a lot when I’m out in the street is homeless people, or people who look so destitute I assume they’re homeless. (53)

This acknowledgement of the economic reality of those she is supposed to be seeing for literary purposes neatly juxtaposes the relative positions of power such writing practice presupposes.

Space for the Muse?

Another model of creativity arises from those student writers who have no guilt issues about a daily practice, those who reject the worker-like version of the artist and strongly believe in the Muse, where writing is kicked off on the whim of inspiration (or, often, by the closeness of their workshopping deadline). Most teachers will consider this to be a model to be discouraged, that such reliance on inspiration, rather than perspiration, will result in shoddy or poorly realised work. Yet another paradox arises, for in her study of the history of the Muse, Alison Habens traces the long tradition of evocation of inspiration for writers, noting that ‘in the past, poets and philosophers alike would not have started to write without an invocation; a plea to some higher source of literary assistance to help find the right words’ (49). Following on from Michelene Wandor’s survey of Creative Writing handbooks which found a ‘curious alliance between Romantic notions of literature and the writer, and the idea of writing-as-therapy’ (113), Habens contends that the Muses are ‘the implied “mascots” of Creative Writing degrees’ (49), even as the notions of genius and talent are actively avoided. Habens succinctly summaries it: ‘with its associations of genius and divine inspiration, the Muse is both a given and an ultimate aim; but how do we make ‘learning outcomes’ out of that?’ (49). Indeed, the need for ‘learning outcomes’ is a salient point, for the emphasise on routine and regularity is surely linked to the continuing ambivalent position of creative writing in the academy where the idea of ‘inspiration’ must be firmly rejected over the ‘perseverance’ enshrouded in the daily routine model of creation because this has a solidity –

a “teach-ability” – which comes closest to the notion of “work”. Another line of inquiry arises around the notion of creative “industry” where anything messy or spur-of-the-moment or, even, accidental, is deemed outside the norm, as unproductive.

Of course, as Nigel McLoughlin points out in his comprehensive analysis of historical models of creativity, artists *do* require ‘periods of focused and defocused attention [and] creative individuals tend to develop strategies for harnessing both’. He recognises the ways in which deadlines, assessment tasks and the surveillance of the academy are problematic to the apprentice writer and argues that ‘theories of play have much to offer’. He continues:

It would seem logical that there should be progression along a continuum from more algorithmic strategies in the early years where apprentice writers need to learn form, structure and craft skills, to a much more heuristic creative strategy in the postgraduate years where the concern becomes more about finding new ways to deploy the skills learned, and to develop theories of poetics which are original and coherent.

This division of the apprentice writer and the postgraduate writer points, again, to the differing skills and strategies the creative writing teacher might employ dependent on the stage of the writer.

Yet there is a difficulty here which come from a top-down notion of pedagogy. That is, the tenant that one needs to know “the rules” in order to “break them” presupposes an ability to play with the imposed restrictions once a certain level has been reached. Not only does this rely on the writer continuing to move through the journey from apprentice to master, it asks for a challenge to Author-ity which many emerging writers are not equipped to undertake.

Assessment task requirements are only one of the many barriers to students finding their own ‘theories of poetics’ in the academic environment. Others will include educational and cultural backgrounds which encourage submission and compliance to the teacher’s advice, as well as the gendered and classed lived experience that dis-empowers specific students, making breaking “the rules” both a perceived, and actual, dangerous undertaking. Janelle Adsit’s work on ‘threshold concepts’ draws attention to the assumptions of privilege in much creative writing pedagogy and how this effects the ability to question instruction:

... the image [of the writer] is eminently white, masculinized, and class-based.

Because of inequalities that are intersectional in nature, writers do not experience rule-breaking in the same way. Those whose circumstances offer the most security and privilege have less to lose in breaking the rules and are less likely to have their conduct policed. (40)

Whilst there is not space in this paper to further expand upon these considerations, I want to point to the student who is given the rule that they must keep a journal or write every day with the implication that this undertaking will enable them a pass (in both senses of the word) into the role of writer. I want teachers to remember that there is no actual evidence such an undertaking will result in writing “success”.

In mapping out the various processes we might undertake during creative writing, Graeme Harper convincingly argues against any notion of a linear practice, rejecting the divisions of ‘pre-writing, writing and post-writing’ in favour of ‘foundation, generation and response’ (64-79). He emphasises the notion of ‘work through synapses’:

That is, through points at which your imaginative and intellectual capacities spark, create ideas, produce writerly actions, suggest in their interaction, association and

ultimately exchange such things as genre, form, structure, subject, theme, at a macro level, and everything from word selection to image or metaphor at a micro level. (77)

This fluid model allows for a to-and-fro relationship between creation and re-creation and, whilst not specifically dealing with the practicalities of writing schedules, it acknowledges that creative writing practices are ‘physical – the actual physical act of inscribing, of writing – and mental; they are *personal* and *cultural*’ (my italics, 79). Yes, there are many professional writers who adhere to strict writing schedules but there are also many others, like Beneba Clarke (and myself) who fit it in when the time allows or the moment arises. I believe in our advice to student writers, we must leave room for the Muse, for the spontaneous or the serendipitous, or we eliminate the ability to ‘play’. Creativity can be manifest not only in the fixed, rigid box of industry, but also in the realm of art and playfulness.

What to teach?

In challenging the seemingly simplest of rules – “write every day” and “keep a journal” – I am aware of undermining some of the easiest pedagogical tools available to the creative writing teacher. To encourage students to adopt a regime of regular writing seems self-evident and aligns with the greater academic obsession with time-management, schedules and deadlines. How can we reasonably omit such advice? How can we not encourage the emerging writer towards daily practice? I am not arguing for a dismissal of such ideas outright, only a consideration of their origin and, thus, the prejudices they may contain. Descriptions of writing practice should be tempered with a recognition there are as many models of creativity as there are writers. Beneba Clarke finds her writing time when she can, and this is no more or less sound than the writer who finds five hours a day to write. I am

arguing for caution when it comes to prescriptions or solid definitions of what will enable a student Maker to embrace the role of Artist and Creator. I am arguing for the teacher to recognise their own habits as personally and culturally positioned. Whilst practice must be a fundamental part of the process of becoming a writer, the notions of writing every day within set schedules or strict journal keeping come from a single vision of the writer, one which is both historically contingent and reliant on certain economic conditions. It may be reassuring to some student writers that hours a day will transform them into artists, but there should still be space for the accidental and the unexpected, for allowing time amongst the ‘rubble of life’ where they might, ultimately, find inspiration. As instructors we must continually be aware of the ways in which we administer advice and be wary of delivering “universal” tenets which reduce the version of a writer to one defining, and confining, model.

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