

Integrated Writing Programmes in American Universities: Whither Creative Writing?

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Over the last decade, American scholars have produced books, essay collections and articles utilising the disciplinary knowledge of rhetoric and composition to produce creative writing pedagogies. Such theorising, for example, refigures belletristic composition as a social, rather than personal enterprise and critiques and displaces the writing workshop, the workhorse of conventional creative-writing pedagogy, with more collaborative approaches. This article argues that despite the growth of this scholarly field, the discourse has had no significant impact on the teaching or staffing of creative writing courses in American universities; the deconstruction of the creative writing/composition binary remains a largely theoretical rather than practical matter. The author shows that this new discourse mostly fails to address, let alone reconcile, underlying material-structural issues that continue to divide composition and creative writing in most institutional settings: the radically different approaches to training MFAs versus PhDs; differing standards for marketable expertise defined by most hiring institutions ('creative' versus 'scholarly' publications); and bifurcated expectations for promotion and tenure. Perhaps most important, this discourse ignores the fierce desire for independence from scholarly community that ironically binds many who teach creative writing.

The evolution of rhetoric and composition – the scholarly apparatus that grew up around the teaching of first-year composition in the American university – has been animated by the consistent push and pull of competing impulses: (1) the desire to claim new intellectual territory, typically grounded in an expansive definition of *rhetoric* and intended to subordinate multiple discursive domains under a master umbrella; and (2) the tendency to separate into smaller, specialised camps with more clearly defined objects of study. The former impulse is largely a theoretical matter, made possible by the remarkably free space of scholarly publication, the academic equivalent of the computer game, SimCity. The latter tendency, to separate, is the perhaps inevitable result of the material demands of location, administration, training, ambition and reward.

As those pursuing scholarly achievement in rhetoric and composition have been propelled further from the first-year classroom by the discipline's emergent discourse, they have rubbed up against critical theories of all sorts, philosophy of the mind, social-science heuristics, and empirical observation and design. Where compositionists have found rich and productive bodies of scholarship already erected to explain and influence practical activities, they have mostly borrowed for the purpose of enriching their own field.

(Despite the deepest desires of rhetoric and composition scholars, it can be argued that the field's scholarship has had no significant impact on work in other fields, even those with whom they share an institutional home.) Where compositionists have found activities or practices unilluminated by significant scholarly activity, they have tended to set up shop in an effort to interpret and inform. Such has been the case with technical writing, writing centres, writing in the workplace and, most recently, creative writing.

The propensity to claim and explain has been greatest where there has been a vacuum, an absence of theory or reflection to account for an object or practice.¹ Creative writing, an institutional space that, owing to the benign neglect of literary studies and its own historical movement away from a scholarly discourse, has been ripe territory for annexation.

Dividing 'Writing'

As a product of the progressive education movement, creative writing in America began in the early 20th century not as formation for the production of literary writers and certainly not as a locus for the production of scholarship, but rather as a 'concrete representation of an idea about the best way to teach literature' (Myers, 1996: 12). Creative writing was initially designed to cultivate literary comprehension through mimicry – the notion that, for example, writing a sonnet will lead to a deeper understanding of and appreciation for sonnets. For the first 50 years of creative writing's history, according to D.G. Myers, creative writing was taught by literary scholars rather than practicing writers of fiction and poetry. The same sort of division between master and novice that sublimated composition to literature in the pre-war period suppressed the possibility that creative writing might be an epistemic activity or an object of study.

The period immediately after the second world war, a time of rapid expansion in the American university, offered the strongest possibility for linking creative writing with knowledge production, but a number of factors conspired to isolate creative writing. The roots of contemporary creative writing's separation from disciplinary activity can be traced to years immediately after the war, the heyday of the New Criticism. Myers accounts for the profound influence of the New Criticism on the writer-teachers who were spawned by the Iowa programme and went on to institute creative writing programmes across the country. The New Criticism, however, by insisting that meaning was a product of close reading, an intensely individual encounter with a text, effectively cut students off from scholarly discourse by consolidating expertise in the virtuosity of the critic. The pedagogical approach that remains common in creative writing today – learning by observation – began in the isolation from scholarship fostered by the New Criticism. Creative writing teachers modelled close reading strategies, often on their own writing, and encouraged students to perfect the practice on their own work. So dominant did this pedagogy become that by the mid-1970s, students in many MFA programmes could finish their degrees solely through completion of workshops and seminars that required no secondary reading materials at all (Myers, 1996: 162–163).

The dominance of this pedagogy at the University of Iowa, where most of the post-war creative writing faculty were milled, had a profound effect on hiring criteria at dozens of institutions where start-up programmes were initiated. The MFA increasingly became understood within hiring English departments as a studio art degree – one oriented toward practice rather than scholarship, individuated production rather than a community of knowledge makers. And the formation of Associated Writing Programs – the professional organisation founded to support creative writing and legitimised by a healthy grant from the National Endowment for the Arts – helped ensure that the MFA would be accepted as the appropriate terminal degree for creative writing teachers. In the same way that tenure-line faculty in the sciences and humanities, as a condition of employment, were expected to continue their graduate school commitments to research and scholarly publication, creative writing teachers were expected to sustain their own graduate school pursuits – the production of their own creative work.

Of course, both scholars and poets became obligated to community approval, but the communities came to be separated by the university and the ideal of the research-oriented scholar. At about the same time that self-taught compositionists were forming the first PhD programmes in rhetoric, creative writing faculty were actively creating MFA programmes. As creative writing was defining itself against the research ethos, rhetoric and composition, following literary studies, was buying into it.

The Authority of Scholarship?

By the end of the 1980s, the division between rhetoric and composition and creative writing was drawing the attention of compositionists whose PhD training provided them with a focus on writing as a process, a self-reflexive attitude toward pedagogy, a commitment to postmodern theory and a healthy interest in institutional critique. Finding in creative writing programmes perhaps a mirror image of composition a decade earlier, Joseph Moxley published in 1989 what may be the seminal work about creative writing informed by composition scholarship, *Creative Writing in America*. Drawing on work in composition, Moxley's own contribution to the volume, according to Wendy Bishop, suggests

that knowledge in that field will redefine our understanding of creativity as 'the natural consequence of learning, involvement, and commitment.' Moxley discusses language studies and composing research; he looks at the scientific method, hemispheric brain research, and writing productivity. In doing so, he claims that it is possible to develop theories of teaching creative writing, and he begins to map out the resources for developing a theory-based pedagogy.

In the same collection, Eve Shelnutt (Moxley, 1989: 7) goes further, charging English departments with 'shelter[ing]' creative writing programmes by providing a 'haven... from intellectual discourse'. Shelnutt finds un- or under-prepared teachers, inappropriately trained and overworked teaching assistants, and insular hiring practices to reflect what she calls an 'anti-intellectual'

bias in many creative writing programmes that isolate them 'from university-wide conversations about teaching and research' (Ritter, 2001: 208). Like Moxley, Shelnutt finds a remedy in the theoretical discourse of a scholarly community.

The subtitle of Moxley's edited collection, *Theory and Pedagogy*, reflects the growing commitment in the late 1980s to composition studies as an intellectual enterprise, and the felt sense that creative writing offered fertile ground for development. The last decade or so has seen something of a cottage industry about creative writing develop within composition. Authors and editors such as Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom, Mary Ann Cain, Lynn Bloom, Patrick Bizzaro, Nancy Welch and others have produced books, essay collections, and articles utilising the disciplinary knowledge of rhetoric and composition in the production of pedagogies for creative writing courses. Such theorising, for example, refigures belletristic composition as a social, rather than personal enterprise; demonstrates the use of classical categories of invention as topoi for writing verse; and critiques and displaces the writing workshop, the workhorse of conventional creative-writing pedagogy, with more collaborative approaches.

Bishop and Ostrom's collection, *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy*, published in 1994, picks up where Moxley's volume leaves off. 'Teachers of creative writing,' Ostrom writes in the Introduction, 'may well make up a disproportionate share of those who retreat from theory' (Bishop & Ostrom, 1994: xii). This line is eerily similar to one written by Maxine Hairston about composition teachers just 12 years prior. According to Hairston, the group of 'people who do most to promote a static and unexamined approach to teaching writing... probably includes most... teachers of writing'. Those who resist the scholarly discourse of theory, Hairston wrote in 1982, are 'probably doing more harm than good' (p. 79). Ostrom is careful to use a collective pronoun, *we*, to call out to teachers of creative writing in *Colors of a Different Horse*, but with an effect similar to Hairston's, Ostrom's *we* creates a *they* – those who resist a scholarly discourse.

A signal move in disciplinary formation is this subordination of a practical activity to the control of an epistemic court, a body of knowledge and knowledge makers. The same sort of literate authority over practice that Ostrom and Hairston assert in these contexts has been claimed for professional writing (see Blyler and Thralls' *Professional Communication*) and writing centre studies (see my critique of Murphy and Sherwood's *Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* in 'Lessons of Inscription'). A clear sign of a field's maturation and stability is the move to claim influence for one's own scholarly discourse on that of another field. A very recent essay collection edited by David Starkey, *Teaching Writing Creatively*, attempts to redirect this emergent discourse about creative writing by composition specialists back toward mainstream writing pedagogy. In the Introduction, Starkey (1998: xiv) endorses what he calls a 'polyculturalist' approach to writing instruction constructed by 'teacher-theorists who, over the years, have actively cross-pollinated areas of writing that had once been isolated from each other'. Similarly, Robert Root promotes the teaching of literary nonfiction as a more defensible aim for first-year composition.

Recently *College English*, the flagship journal of the US National Council of Teachers of English, has devoted an entire issue to creative writing, and much of it reflects the influence of composition. Since 1996, there have been enough sessions focused on creative writing at the College Composition and Communication Convention that they were being identified as a group in the annual programme's Topic Index to Concurrent Sessions. Clearly composition has claimed creative writing as a correlative, but who all is listening? This question seems particularly apt now as the discipline turns toward its future, the undergraduate writing major, both in print and in practice.

The Association of Writers and Writing Programs

While compositionists often assume to be directing the movement toward advanced undergraduate study 'in' writing, academic creative writers have a deeply entrenched sense of ownership over that term and a curriculum deeply embedded in most English departments. Compositionists seeking to institutionalise writing majors in their own terms face a formidable ideological resistance from creative writers unable to share their discourse, yet they also must combat a perception – buttressed by a solid curricular presence across the country – that advanced undergraduate study in writing means fiction, poetry and the narrative essay. Compositionists seeking to separate from departments of English on the route to a stand-alone writing programme or integrated writing major must consider their relationship to creative writing curricula, which is typically already in place.

There is little evidence that most of those hired as creative writers in English departments have any awareness of the discourse about creative writing taking place within composition studies, and there is little to suggest that they would defer to it if they did. Those who have feet in both fields paint a rather dismal picture. Kelly Ritter (2001: 209) charges that both MFA and PhD programmes in creative writing 'by design encourage [creative] writers to become islands adrift professionally and intellectually from their larger English departments'. Lacking training in theory and pedagogy, and devoid of commitment to scholarly discourse as an ideal of academic excellence, creative writers, Ritter contends, take on 'a collective academic identity' as 'writers' and 'artists' *as opposed to* teachers or scholars (p. 210). A collective identity, what compositionists might call a discourse, is defined – as discourses inevitably are – in a negative relationship to the values and commitments of competing discourses. One might say that compositionists who wander into creative writing circles are suspect because their discursive markers betray their status as outsiders, but the more direct explanation would be that they are suspect because they write and talk about such things as 'discourses.'

Patrick Bizzaro details his own experience with this 'rhetoric of isolation'. Recalling a conversation with a poet after giving a paper at The Association of Writers and Writing Programs' Pedagogy Forum, Bizzaro foregrounds the

poet's claim that the AWP's nod toward teaching is something of a shell game that allows creative writers to secure funding to attend on the basis of 'presenting a paper' so they can exploit the conference's networking opportunities. A cynic, of course, might make this charge of any academic conference; however, the AWP's own 'Values and Beliefs' section of their *Strategic Plan: 2000–2010*, is telling. 'AWP believes', this document states, 'that those accomplished in making literature are the most effective teachers of writing and literature' (p. 10). Unlike composition studies, which has been undergoing a rigorous, self-conscious critique of graduate training since the publication of the second *Rhetoric Review* survey of graduate programmes in 1994, the only organisation representing the interests of creative writing faculty neglects the function of graduate training in the preparation of teachers all together. 'The most accomplished writer makes the best teacher of writing' the *Strategic Plan* indicates, a presumption that warrants the following 'strategic goal'. 'To cultivate, discover, and reward excellence in the writing of contemporary literature' (p. 36). In support of this goal, the AWP articulates specific plans to improve creative publication opportunities, increase 'the viability and prestige' of its own writing awards, and strengthen its endowment (37–38). It strikes some compositionists as odd that the AWP's ten-year plan does not promote any attention at all to teacher training in American MFA and PhD programmes.

My purpose here is not to bash The Association of Writers and Writing Programs or to suggest that its assumption about creative publication as the arbiter of good teaching is misguided; American PhD training in the Humanities in general made a similar assumption about the publication of criticism for almost a century. My point, however, is that while compositionists have contested this assumption openly and self-reflexively almost since they began forming graduate programmes, such critique will not appear on the AWP's agenda any time before 2010. As compositionists seek to gain the support of creative writers for integrated undergraduate programmes in writing studies, the question of what qualifies as sound preparation to teach postsecondary writing will deeply divide them.

In calling for specific course work in teacher training for creative writing MFA and PhD programmes, Kelly Ritter aims to specifically reorient the standard of preparation for and appointment to creative writing positions away from the AWP's emphasis on the 'working writer'. By framing the issue of preparation for academic appointment exclusively in terms of teaching, however, Ritter fails to address an even deeper rift – it is not only an identity for creative writing faculty as 'teacher' that the AWP hopes to avoid, it is an identity as 'scholar'. It is the distant, magisterial voice of theory or 'research' to which teacher training submits; those who come to recognise their authority and ability as teachers to be the product of academic training become *de facto* clients of published scholarship. And to displace the consumption and production of literature with the production and consumption of theory would effectively denature contemporary creative writing.

Conclusion

As my own department – which includes seven tenure-track faculty with dissertations in rhetoric and composition – has negotiated the possibility of an undergraduate major in writing centred on the study of genre and writing for the public sphere, communication with colleagues in creative writing has been the most difficult. As Wendy Bishop writes, creative writers and compositionists often grow in different gardens ('A Rose'). My experience is similar to that described by Daniel Royer and Roger Gilles in their contribution to *A Field of Dreams*, an essay collection on independent writing programmes. As Grand Valley State University (Allendale, MI) debated dividing into two departments, where creative writing might reside became 'the most contentious issue' (p. 31). According to Royer and Gilles (2002: 32), GVSU literature faculty understood the function of creative writing in the terms we've seen trace back to the Progressive Education movement of the 1920s – 'a principal goal of creative writing [is] to introduce students to great literature'.

Like Royer and Gilles, we found at DePaul University in Chicago that both literary and creative writing faculty felt creative writing had 'the look and feel of the liberal arts' (Royer & Gilles, 2002: 32), while professional writing and rhetoric and composition smacked of vocational training and the social sciences. While many of us in rhetoric and composition went into the process naively assuming the general support of our creative writing colleagues, that relationship turned out to be the one most charged with suspicion, misunderstanding and ill will. Our shared commitment to scholarly discourse, theory and critique allowed some common ground for discussion with our colleagues in literature, particularly the junior faculty. The creative writers, though, displayed a remarkably fierce obligation to literature qua literature – a near-holy commitment to something they tend to see diminished by self-conscious interpretive positions.

Like the vast majority of compositionists, most creative writing teachers work in departments of English rather than in field-specific programmes. If the future of composition studies is in independent writing programmes, as the editors of *A Field of Dreams* seem to suggest, these two groups will continue to contest each other as they seek to strengthen their respective positions through expanding curricula. If we can take the AWP – which promotes the pursuit of individual literary achievement in front of everything else – as the voice of creative writing in America, then we can assume that the impetus for curricular development in 'writing,' writ large, is likely to come from compositionists. Creative writers will likely continue to be drawn or forced into discussions of curricular change feeling isolated, suspicious and defensive. Like Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*, they may be remarkably resistant to persuasion, having refused the most fundamental warrants of compositionists at the outset. As American faculty in rhetoric and composition continue to imagine how to negotiate collaborations with or separations from their creative writing colleagues, all will be hard pressed to find common ground.

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Notes

1. This colonial impulse is hardly novel and in no way natural; rhetoric and composition itself emerged from the scholarly absence of writing instruction created by scholarship in English studies, and the search for the unexplained is a nearly involuntary obligation created by graduate study.

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