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A or C: Can We Assess Creative Work Fairly?

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During year six, at the vulnerable age of eleven, I submitted two poems to my teacher. We were often allowed to write poems instead of the standard composition. The first one was entitled "Books?" The second, written two months later, was an untitled poem about spring. I received an "Excellent" for the first effort and a "Very Good" on the second. Aside from the disappointment of getting slightly worse, not better, over time, I don't think I was depressed.

Over recent years, however, I have begun to wonder about those marks. I often read one or the other of these poems to schoolchildren to prove that I began writing early, and also to prove that what you produce at the age of eleven doesn't necessarily ensure you will become a writer. The "Very Good" poem was a B, but why? Because it offered a cliched portrayal of spring (it did), or because I had misspelled dew and caterpillar? My teacher, you see, unlike many today, knew how to spell. Did my "Books?" poem rate an "Excellent" because it was long (I managed to fill two pages), or because, even though it didn't scan nearly as well as the seasonal piece, it demonstrated what we like to call imagination (and contained some rhymes that must have inadvertently made my teacher laugh)? Writing teachers in Australia today, probably at some time or other, ferret among their childhood productions to investigate those first experiences of assessment. Perhaps being told a piece was not satisfactory spurred them on to prove the marker wrong.

Courses, programs and degrees incorporating some component of creative writing, or focusing wholly on it, are proliferating in Australia. In this respect, we are catching up with the United States and England. We have more in common with the English in the difficulties we face because we have a three-year, not a four-year degree system for university. When there is so much to learn and so little time, what courses students enrol in and what they earn (for marks are currency) take on profound significance.

Assessment, therefore, is of prime concern to students and their teachers. Marks affect students psychologically; the by-now cliched concept of self-esteem has been used in some quarters to justify grade inflation. More to the point, in our "clever country," students know that what appears on their transcript might determine whether they are granted a job interview. To complicate matters, teachers in our sceptical century have found assessment in many arts subjects problematic, especially those where the quality of the argument and the expression itself are the issues. In science subjects, teachers find it easier to insist that answers are either right or wrong.

Some advantages of assessment are that students receive a reasonable estimate of their performance (as opposed to their ability) in a certain limited context (the course or the assignment). They can learn in which areas they function well and in which they need to improve. Further, they receive feedback about how to improve. On another level, assessment offers a guide to outsiders (other teachers or potential employers, for instance) about how people might perform. The disadvantages are obvious. Low assessment can provoke low self-esteem; students might give up and taint the atmosphere of the class. Teachers can be biased or unfair; they might offer destructive, not constructive, feedback, or none at all.

This is obviously only a thumbnail sketch of some of the pros and cons of assessment. I intend to focus on an area where it is most problematic because the advantages and disadvantages are intensified: creative writing. Here students produce and are therefore in charge of the content to some degree; they are personally involved in what comes from their own imaginations. Teachers also function as individual readers with their own tastes and prejudices. Whether teachers write themselves or not, they must ask themselves similar questions. What criteria do they use and how clear can they be about them to students? How safe is it to be clear, given that marking someone else's creative work can sometimes provoke emotional reactions far stronger than marking an academic essay? Does it make a difference to teachers' confidence and authority if they publish successfully themselves? Is there a difference between how those who are teachers only and how those who are also professional writers mark? These are only some of the questions we can pose about this contentious area.

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For over twenty years I have taught poetry, fiction and writing for children in tertiary institutions, in the schools and in the community both in the United States and Australia. I have taught pass/fail writing courses and graded courses; I have used letters and numbers. Sometimes, luckily enough, I didn't have to mark at all. There are pros and cons to every method and students respond variously, too. The key, however, to any workable marking structure lies in tying assessment to teaching content and method. I will argue, therefore, that teachers can assess creative writing successfully.

Before I examine in detail some methods I have found fruitful, I want to clarify that there are two aspects to assessment, the theoretical and the practical, and both need to be addressed. The theoretical considers: can we assess creative writing? The practical considers: how do we assess it? Conditioning the answers to these two questions is the clientele of the course: who takes it and what do they expect? The sharper teachers can be about the enterprise of teaching what only a few decades ago was not an academic subject, the more confident they can be of serving those whose egos are often fragile. Teachers are not infallible, but they aim to integrate content and method to achieve a desired outcome. The outcome will vary depending upon the purpose of the course, but it is identifiable.

In a talk delivered to Amherst College students in the United States, the American poet Robert Frost attacked the issue not only of what students, but what teachers, expect. Professors, he explains, "are, first and foremost in life, markers."¹ As a teacher himself, Frost does not find this unreasonable: "We are all being marked by each other all the time, classified, ranked, put in our place, and I see no escape from that. I am no sentimentalist" (Frost, 156). Obviously, however, teachers do much more. Frost believes they can in fact assess "taste and judgment" (Frost, 157), although most would not be open about what they were doing: "No one is willing to admit that his discipline is not partly in exactness. No one is willing to admit that his discipline is not partly in taste and enthusiasm" (Frost, 157). Frost's problem is not so severe since he lived in a radically different era where teachers did not have to justify their methods.

We live, however, in a far more material and politically correct world. Teachers are not simply guides leading students to self and world knowledge, if they ever were. In an article in *Overland*, writer Kevin Brophy analyses the relationship between teacher and student. He does not talk about power relations between the two as a contest of wills, which is one way of formulating the problem of assessment. He sees the freedom to compose in a creative writing course as a type of pleasure. When assessment rears its head, things might turn nasty: "The problem with assessment in creative writing involves again the problem of power relations between pleasure and education. Any imposed grading re-inserts the authority of the teacher and the institution while the workshopping processes favoured in creative writing courses tend to offer some 'author-ity' to every participant" (Brophy, 55). Does this mean we should not assess because it works against what creative writing courses should be doing: nurturing young authors, teaching them how to become who they want and need to be?

In these courses, students are the authors whom their peers study, but how can they do this in the context of contemporary literary theory? Cultural forces take precedence over personal intentions. Readers construct their own texts. Isn't the author dead? That is what some of the students will have learned and they might feel odd sitting in a classroom of articulate corpses. The teacher as marker is put in a quandary, too. If authors can be absent from the text, who can be held responsible and receive the mark?

In a provocative recent book, *Teaching Creative Writing 3* (which encompasses both the British and American experience), Robert Miles poses an ingenious model for the relationship between this upstart subject and contemporary literary theory, particularly structuralism and post-modernism. He sees them in a position of "tensed complementariness",⁴ which is beneficial educationally. When a class asks a student, after copious discussion among themselves, what he or she really meant, they are doing what Miles calls "reinstat[ing] the language of intention" (Miles, 36). Students become, in a sense, a species of living paradox; they themselves have to work out what they believe: "At its simplest, [the tension] affords the student the opportunity of comparing theories of how texts come into being with the actual experience of bringing texts into being" (Miles, 37). This paradigm is mirrored more specifically by the two emphases a teacher can place in a creative writing course: . . . "regarding writing from the point of view of the professional writer, of those producing writing for a market-place, on the one side and, on the other, regarding texts from the vantage-point of literary criticism" (Miles, 37).

What about teachers, however, who are also not only literary critics and editors, but primary producers themselves? Will students worry about their authority as authors in the workshop context being usurped in the marking of the final portfolio? Teachers here can fulfil multiple functions besides academic adjudicators and are

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more than experienced workshoppers. They are like audiences who approve of a piece by recommending it to their friends; they are like readers who canvass manuscripts for publishers; they are like editors who work with an author to bring a manuscript to an acceptable state; and they are like publishers themselves who finally say yea or nay. Many students fantasise about publishing and the ones who do not certainly take the point when a teacher explains manuscripts in a professional context.

More to the point, however, teachers who publish successfully themselves are not simply authorities, but models. Since they have done it, they must know how it is done; and they also understand the element of chance. A wonderfully planned story can, when written, be lifeless. Scribbled notes can catch fire and burn out of the writer's control. The inspiration varies and so does the amount of revision necessary; the pattern of composition is not static, but active. The teacher-writer can testify to this fact and his or her knowledge of the unpredictability of creative work is certainly an element in assessment.

The authority of teachers who are themselves active writers does to some extent rest on their having succeeded. Most students would subscribe to Ezra Pound's analysis of the writer-student relationship in *The ABC of Reading*:

If you wanted to know something about an automobile, would you go to a man who had made one and driven it, or to a man who had merely heard about it?
And of the two men who had made automobiles, would you go to one who had made a good one, or one who had made a botch? 5

I am not suggesting all teachers of creative writing can or should be internationally famous. Those teachers, however, who submit their work periodically bring a different sort of knowledge to the task that validates what a creative writing course does more than any theory. They can certainly empathise with their students' frustrations. I have found that students are often more interested in hearing about my rejections than my acceptances. Here teachers can be models of perseverance rather than excellence. Most writers have been rejected; they learn to resubmit. Then there are the stories of triumph; the poem or story as underdog, which has been buffeted about by editors, finally accepted. These are all aspects of the "I told you so" or "so there" syndrome we all hope some day we will enjoy. Beyond the debate about whether we can assess creative writing lies the universe of the active writer, who knows that his or her work is constantly being "assessed" by editors, by publishers, by readers and by critics.

Although I trained as an academic, I am also a writer. As a consequence, I believe that creative writing can be assessed in two ways. Teachers can focus on the element of craft: on technique, on what can be transmitted. They can also assess less tangible elements, as we do already in essays, where we mark more than grammatical correctness, structure and comprehension. For instance, in a high distinction essay, teachers can gain new insights; and every so often a student takes a chance, does a creative instead of a strictly academic piece and pulls it off. We reward that effort as well.

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In a creative writing course, teachers can, therefore, describe what outcomes they hope students will achieve, define their purposes and tailor the assessment so that both they and the students feel the system is fair. Students' reasons for enrolling in courses vary, however. Some do want to be writers, some just want imaginative stimulation and some crave a different perspective on literature. The existence of a variety of reasons is what led me in the first instance to teach creative writing in the United States in 1975 as a pass/fail option. I did not want students to be competitive; I wanted to focus on improvement; I did not, at that stage in my career, want to be responsible for judging. I simply hoped to be teaching students who wanted to write, not students who wanted to be rewarded for it. The amount and quality of the constructive feedback I offered on their work was not altered by the fact of grading it or not. I felt progressive, too, back in 1975, since hardly any courses at the college in question were taught in this way. Students felt liberated from anxiety over marks; they could take risks. In fact, using this system, no one failed.

When I first came to Australia I also taught a Craft of Poetry course as a pass/fail option. In both instances I felt that students who would give up the carrot of grades, who would include in their degree something that would not announce to the outside world what their merit was, must be committed. And it was true for the time. Students who took the course participated whole-heartedly and submitted more than the minimum amount of work. Neither I nor my students felt pressured.

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The university world has changed, however, and so has the clientele. Courses need to attract a minimum number of students to survive and in writing courses, class sizes have risen. Students worry much more about the quality of their degrees and, therefore, marks matter. A credible degree, they are told, will net them a job and will confer status. Paradoxically, even though many students still take courses of this type for self-realisation, they do not see their education as a whole in this way. The degree is tangible and it must produce tangible rewards soon after graduation. Contrast the atmosphere in a university writing class with one in a community writing workshop. In the latter, participants have reasons as varied as undergraduates. They are not, however, interested in cut-and-dried assessment.

When I returned to university teaching after an absence of seven years and a long stretch as a community arts worker, I had no choice but to teach creative writing as an assessed subject. I was forced into what George Marsh, an English writing teacher, calls "periodic attitudes of disrespect."⁶ Whatever relationship I had built up with students would be affected once I assessed a piece of work (as it is in any subject).

Since I had to assess, I needed to consider the course as a whole and who would take it. I decided to screen applicants again, as I had for the pass/fail course. The advantages and disadvantages of selecting students from a pool, however, depend upon what you screen for. I screen not for quality, but for commitment. In this way I ensure that students are both enthusiastic and serious about the course, issues that are separate from talent. I do not want students who think my writing courses will be easy options. Having to write a brief statement (no more than 250 words) about why they want to undertake the course makes them think about what they want. I can then respond by considering how I can meet the plethora of needs. I also ask for a piece of any type of creative work; failing that, a piece of prose they like. The classes still turn out to contain a range of abilities, but I know what to expect.

I always use detailed handouts explaining my theoretical and practical framework. I build in a craft and a professional component. For example, students prepare an assignment as if it were being submitted to a publisher. Students usually love this sense of risk. Minimum amounts of writing to be submitted for assessment are clear, but I leave room for negotiation. When reading drafts, I ask questions similar to those of any teacher when marking essays. Instead of asking how successfully the student has constructed an argument, I can frame the question: how successfully has the student fulfilled the criteria they have set up for themselves in a poem or story? A sonnet is not a rap poem, nor do I expect it to sound and hold together like one. I always ask implicitly: is a piece original? Is the language effective and appropriate to the subject? Is it an imitation? Does it fulfil the length requirements? These are specific aspects that can be assessed. Students can demonstrate development, too, by selecting the best from the free work and exercises that we have discussed during a semester and by submitting drafts.

Teaching children's writing as opposed to poetry and fiction is different, however. In certain ways I have found teaching the former easier, but not because the type of writing itself is. The attitude of the students to their perceived expertise in the area varies. Even if they are teenagers and still read children's books, for themselves or to young children, most are willing to accept that they do not know much about children's literature as a field or as a craft. Most have done some creative writing in school, but this has usually taken the form of poems or stories. Many believe, however, that they write poems with some authority – that of the literate human being who ipso facto knows his or her own feelings and therefore how to express them in poetry. Although I always insist that an excellent picture book is in many ways like a poem, most students have not ever written one. With children's writing, they agree that there are techniques to learn and that without that knowledge they cannot do it competently. As a teacher and practising children's writer, I am someone, they believe, who can transmit those techniques.

My first editor of a picture book walked me through the process of constructing and editing it over the phone. He taught me the physical process of laying a book out and how to pay attention to integrating the verbal and visual narratives. In this sense, writing for children functions as other artistic disciplines where students never question that they have to learn both the theory and the practice; disciplines such as music or visual art. Of course, poets and fiction writers have a craft to teach, but it is sometimes harder to convince students of it. They do not believe that they necessarily have to know what a metrical foot or an omniscient narrator is.

I focus on writing for younger children – picture books, short stories, junior novels, novels for the pre-teen and young teenager, poetry. My writing courses always include a critical component and a generous amount of reading to balance the creative component. The critical dimension is involved less with writing than with class discussion. Below is the introduction to the course description of Writing for Children:

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This topic offers the opportunity to write for children. Students who enrol will learn about the craft of writing as well as about the cultural environment in which writing for children is received. This course, then, aims to:

- 1. introduce students to contemporary Australian children's literature;
- 2. examine the crucial issues affecting children's writers (for example, censorship; how children learn to read, etc.);
- 3. develop students' understanding of the relationship between verbal and visual narratives;
- 4. develop students' creativity and polish their writing skills; and
- 5. sharpen their critical abilities.

The simple fact that students realise once the semester begins is that writers for children are more conscious of audience because of the cultural climate in which they write. Their audience does not, in almost all instances, choose books for themselves. Adults select as parents, community librarians or schoolteachers. Writers, then, need to consider both groups, whether they like it or not.

Most of my last Writing for Children class chose to submit picture books as the final project and submitted several drafts, which were workshopped every few weeks. By the time they had finished they had learned an enormous amount from the experience. In an ideal educational environment, students should be able to revise until their work has realised its potential. In the United States in 1974 and 1975, I had the good fortune to be able to allow students in an Advanced Expository Writing Course to do just that. I was young, energetic and actually had more time. I certainly could not repeat that experience now.

Some teachers still lobby to create that ideal environment. In his article on assessment, George Marsh asserts that tertiary institutions should institute "flexible timescales" (Marsh, 58). But how could teachers convince the administration? Registries have deadlines for marks and so do degrees funded by the government. Deadlines are the enemy of an individual student's progress. The best a teacher can arrange is to institute what Marsh has termed "the sampling principle" (Marsh, 48), which allows students to select from a body of work what items they want assessed.

Ultimately, however, the clock strikes "ready or not." The piece of work must reach the hands of the teacher, like a poem that finally has to be slipped into the envelope and mailed to a journal, where it will be judged by an editor. There is no escaping that fate if writers want to reach a wider audience eventually.

Although a number of writers and teachers by now have designed their own courses and programs, each with its own rationale behind assessment, it is worth concluding by asking a general question and then answering it on a personal level. Once teachers admit that they have to mark, what then? What are they evaluating – craft, competence, talent, soul, presentation? (My primary school teacher who marked my poems was also a confirmed neatness addict.) Defining what teachers believe they can teach and students can learn helps to tailor assessment procedures.

In my writing classes, I do not believe that what I am teaching is talent. I do not think that is why students do or should take a creative writing course. I do aim to allow students to maximise their imaginative potential, to do the best that they possibly can and to take their efforts seriously. The number of revisions a student produces for a piece can demonstrate those things. Knowledge of the problems facing the practising writer ensures that no student ever approaches the study of literature in quite the same way. By becoming co-writers, in a sense, with those they study, students gain an insight into the creative process. This insight can be demonstrated, too, when they look at the work of other authors critically.

When marks are finally awarded, however, what do they mean? Is a high distinction or an A perfect? This is a bit like asking: if a poem or story is accepted for publication in a magazine, is it perfect? Is it even finished? Most writers have had poems published that they decided not to include in the next book because they thought they were of inferior quality. If the term "perfect" does not apply to the published work, or to the works in the old English literature canon, for that matter, then grades should not have the kind of absoluteness that students often feel they have. As long as marks are accompanied by a generous amount of comment, they do not have to harm or to mislead (which can happen when a student always receives high marks because they are better than others in comparison).

Certainly, no matter how we theorise and justify, we need to convince students that the system is workable. Creative writing can be taught as a subject and assessed. This does not mean teachers mete out blame or praise. Alert and dedicated students usually know when something is not their best and often admit it, even if they do not know how to fix what is wrong. That is why they are in a workshop – to benefit from the collective minds of their peers and from the teacher's guidance. Rather than being demoralised by constructive criticism, many students become excited in the workshop environment when suddenly their piece is illuminated – not as perfect, but as fallible. What has been illuminated is the road they need to follow to find what that piece of writing could be. A mark at the end of a semester might indicate just how far on that road they have travelled.

Finally, as teachers we should aim to be as dispassionate as subjective human beings can be to minimise the disadvantages in judging another person's work. We can move towards this goal by offering students clear assignments with reasonable guidelines. Any mark comes down to a teacher's evaluation of the effort they think a student has expended, how closely a work has fulfilled general criteria and its quality – the hardest item to define and the most subjective. Yet as readers, critics and our own most stringent judges, quality in literature is something we constantly strive to attain.

NOTES

1 Robert Frost, "Education by Poetry: A Meditative Monologue " in *Writer to Writer: Readings on the Craft of Writing*, Floyd C. Watkins, Karl F. Knight, eds. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966) 156. Cited subsequently as Frost.

2 Kevin Brophy, "Strange Practices: Anxiety, Power and Assessment in Teaching Creative Writing ", *Overland*, 137 (Summer, 1994) 55-57. Cited subsequently as Brophy.

3 Moira Monteith and Robert Miles, eds., *Teaching Creative Writing: Theory and practice* (Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1992).

4 Robert Miles, "Creative writing, contemporary theory and the English curriculum " in *Teaching Creative Writing*, 37. Cited subsequently as Miles.

5 Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading in Modern Poetics*, James Scully, ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965) 9.

6 George Marsh, "43%: A commentary on aims and assessments in the teaching of literary writing " in *Teaching Creative Writing*, 45. Cited subsequently as Marsh.

Letters and Debate

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