On Unknowing Creative Writing Pedagogy

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And, in the unstable world we had entered, I heard the very

cadence of my own voice changing, assuming the certain

authority of the already-known, and, over time, I began to

recognize repetition as an organizing principle in my own

classroom, to hear myself tell the same stories, say the same

things—to teach, as it were, what I already knew.

— Katherine Haake

On Office Conversations

I was certain nothing good could come from being summoned to my incoming department

chair's office just two weeks before the fall semester would begin, but I went, peeked my head

into Dr. White's doorway, and waited.

“Brent, would you switch a pre-comp for Writing for Young Readers?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said, and I thought something good—my first course in the writing

major—was certainly coming. I left my new chair's office with a stack of her books for the

course, a syllabus from the last section she had taught, a stack of disarrayed notes, and an equally

disarrayed mind. I didn't know how in a few weeks I would gain a working knowledge of a field I had never before considered, but I took the materials I was offered, walked down to my office on the composition side of our office suite, and I began to mold those old materials and a list of favorite books from my first eighteen years into my course plans.

During the first student conferences of the semester, I realized something was not good. Allison, a senior writing major, sat in my office, said, "Yesterday, I spent thirty minutes at the copier," indicating her displeasure with the readings I had placed on reserve for her class. "Isn't this a *writing* class?" she asked, missing the workshop-focused classroom Dr. White, her literary mentor, provided her during her tenure of study at our university.

I was missing my composition classroom, where I spent most of my teaching hours, and where I felt most knowledgeable. In the first years of my teaching life, I had many opportunities to teach composition, and I had crafted a composition pedagogy that met my needs and the needs of my students, but this was my first opportunity to develop a creative writing pedagogy. As Allison left my office, and I sat alone, waiting for my next appointment, I began to ask questions I needed to answer. How should the open space of the workshop-based classroom be occupied? What was the role of reading for the writing student? How should I best guide my students' writing experiences? What goals would shape my decisions for future courses? Allison was accustomed to a senior professor guiding her creative writing courses with a persona her students had grown to admire. Writing exercises, workshop commentary, and rules for writing were the standards she had grown to expect, and I was not working within her expectations.

In the course I created, writing exercises remained, but the workshop commentary and rules for writing were replaced with portfolio conferences and shared readings, and this transition

wasn't working. With limited time to prepare for the class, I reverted to one habit I had long ago abandoned in the composition classroom—relying on literature to provide the content of the course. Philip Hobsbaum advises, "Treat the book as no good, until it proves itself otherwise. With students assume they're good: let them prove they aren't" (qtd. in Maley 91). I would have been wise and brave to follow Hobsbaum's advice, to trust the skills of the students who were entrusted to my instruction. The shared readings I had chosen were failing to address "students' needs, skills, and motivations" (Morrow and Gambrell 419), because they limited the experiences of a group of young writers whose collective knowledge of children's books was far more comprehensive than the knowledge I gathered in the few weeks before the start of the semester. Despite the failure of the shared readings, the draft conferences clearly were effective. In conferences, Allison and her peers were communicating their learning needs, and they were providing the knowledge and experience I would need to create a more successful course.

On Classes of Reading

Reading has always been considered an essential aspect of the writer's education. Katherine Haake writes, "Reading is the one certain thing that we do […] Read, read, read, creative writing students are exhorted." (17). My creative writing teachers held this perspective, and I was, indeed, told to read—moreover, I most often was told the titles of the books I would read. In graduate workshops I read books written by my professors, by friends of my professors, and, once, by a spouse of a professor. Most of those books appeared and disappeared in my mind; however, my first experience of reading to become a better writer has not been forgotten.

After the workshop of one of my early—and, certainly, embarrassing—poems, my Introduction to Creative Writing professor suggested, as we were walking out of class, I might be interested in James Dickey's poems. Because I respected Dr. McCrory, whose wingtips and suit coats made him appear so professorial, I walked straight to the library and checked out every book in their holdings by James Dickey. His suggestion, however, was far different than the defined, authoritative list I had chosen for my students. His choice was based on his knowledge of the content and context of my writing, not on his personal bias, because he was teaching more than a course—he was teaching his student.

Directed readings in upper-level undergraduate and graduate creative writing workshops can be offered with good intentions. As a child, I read *The Poky Little Puppy* more times than I can imagine, and, as a teen, I avidly read Douglas Adams' *Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy* and the following four books that completed its trilogy. These books were important to my experiences, and I wanted to share them. Like poet Gerry Lafemina, I wanted to take each book in my hand, to "talk about its importance to me;" I wanted to "tell my students how I happened to discover it," to share "my passion for and relationship to the work" (432). Those were partly noble desires, but they also were selfish desires. I wanted to serve as an influence on my students, to shape their thoughts about this genre of literature with my ideas and experiences, and I wanted to serve as an authority. With these two intentions competing, the reality of the course was not meeting my highest ideal.

Remembering the influence Dr. McCrory's reading suggestion exerted on my writing life, I was attempting to exert a similar influence on my students, but I was also attempting to build the type of legacy that Dr. White had developed. I wasn't telling my students, "Hey, listen

to all of these voices, then offer your own voice," (Scholes 287); I was telling my students, "Hey, listen to all of these voices, then offer your voice as a voice that sounds like a voice I would create." I was focusing on presenting my knowledge; I was focusing on creating my authority; I was focusing on my needs; and, in the process, I was failing to be the mentor Dr. McCrory had been to me; I was failing to provide the support my students needed.

Writers define themselves through their literary heritages. Years after I was introduced to the work of James Dickey, I still consider his poetry part of my writing identity. We reflect our literary heritages in our reading lives, in our devotion to the texts that shape our writing lives, and in our devotion to our influences, often beginning early and lasting late. LaFemina defines this devotion as the "legacy of being influenced" (435). At that moment, I was leaving a legacy of waste—a waste of pages of paper and a waste of my first opportunity to teach in the field of creative writing—yet, weeks were remaining in the semester. I could change my legacy, while it was still being formed; I could still become a positive influence in the lives of the students I was teaching. As Tony Dungy writes, "We all will leave a legacy. The only question is what kind of legacy we will leave" (101).

On the Praxis of Position

When Allison added, "Dr. White doesn't ask us to read so much, and she usually gives us a list of rules for each genre we write," I felt my literary heritage was being rejected because my position didn't carry enough authority. From Allison's perspective I was a freshman composition teacher whose position in the classroom was shadowed by the legacy of a star teacher. My

presence was unwanted, and my pedagogy was unknown. After hearing Allison's critiques, I

began to consider how I might craft a pedagogy that would allow me to present a fully authentic

identity and a shared authority within the creative writing classroom. My writing professors,

after all, never struggled with establishing their identity or authority in the classroom.

When my professors walked into the classroom, I would see their books floating above their

heads, along with the heads of the great authors who had blurbed the dust jackets of their latest

collection, saying, "Your teacher is an extraordinary poet, an astoundingly supple voice." By the

fifth week of class, I might have snapped back to reality, and realized that these famous poets

weren't saying much that was useful about my poems, but, by that time, reality would have less

effect on my perception of my teachers. They would be stars, and I would adore them

wholeheartedly. Hans Ostrom writes, "Teachers of creative writing are likely to rely on

validation through performance […] and testimony" (xiii). As a young writer, like Allison, I was

awed by the performances and testimonies of my teachers. Now, I realize that their stories about

their mentors and their collection of aphorisms about the craft of writing benefited their students'

writing very little.

As a young writing teacher who was teaching his first upper-level writing class, I could

not stand on reputation, and I could not stand on performance and testimony, even had I intended

to follow my teachers' models. I didn't have books with dust jacket blurbs, and I couldn't tell

stories about my mentor, the former poet laureate. The elements that filled my workshop would

have to come entirely from outside of my persona, and I had never seen a workshop that didn't

rely, to some degree, on persona. I understood fully well the feelings Audrey Petty captures

when she writes, "I painfully realized that I could not inhabit the same space as my

mentor/colleague did as a teacher. He taught as a storyteller. I couldn't. I couldn't tell long and colorful anecdotes about my personal experiences or share my own deep musings" (79). I could, however, define personal strengths that would allow me to teach well.

I could position myself as a student engaged with texts, a student who filled the role of senior learner in the classroom; the roles of teacher and learner were partnered within my identity as a young writer. Many of my own teachers saw themselves as writers first, as authorities; the roles of learner, and, subsequently, teacher, were incidental to their identity. Then, as now, I could not allow one identity a claim of dominance. As Wendy Bishop often said, "Some days I am a writer who teaches and on the others, I am a teacher who writes" (qtd. in Ritter and Vanderslice xiv). I could fill both of those roles, and my inexperience allowed me to claim also the role of student. If I could present myself simply as a writer and teacher, and a student as well, perhaps I could still add value to the writing lives of my students.

In claiming the role of teacher and learner as primary to my identity, I was claiming a role seen as secondary by many who taught me creative writing. Serving a marginal community of student writers, pedagogy has been given little space in the field of creative writing; so little space has been given to creative writing pedagogy that Ted Lardner wrote, in response to his search for a defined creative writing pedagogy, he found "no 'discipline' there" (74). The teaching of creative writing, however, has provided classroom space for published writers since creative writing first became a field of study at the University of Iowa. In the early days of creative writing pedagogy at Iowa, the model for the study of creative writing was based on the master-apprentice model that placed the published writer at the center of creative writing

workshop. Teaching within that model in my classroom was requiring me to claim an authority I did not possess, the authority of the master.

The current-traditional workshop positions student writing as subject and positions instructors as authority, denying student authors the right to speak about their work and encouraging workshop instructors to disengage from their responsibility to constructive pedagogy. Rosalie Morales Kearns offers this critique of the model: "The focus on fault finding precludes a thorough and meaningful engagement with the author's work on its own terms. […] if I as the author am silenced […] and you as commentator have not truly engaged the work because you focused only on 'flaws' […] we are in a situation where true communication can't take place: I can't speak and you aren't listening" (805). In the workshop that focuses on finding fault and avoiding communication, the master-apprentice are bound to share no discipline, and they are bound to develop no relationship, for they do not communicate. This lack of relationship and communication leads to a lack of productive work, to a lack of teaching, and to a lack of learning.

From years of experience as a creative writing student, I understood that I needed to provide more than performance and testimony, more than authority, but, having been educated in the current-traditional model throughout my graduate education, I could no longer imagine a creative writing pedagogy that did not rely on the authority of the master. The shared texts were my attempt to move the center of the classroom away from my authority, but that effort failed. François Camoin writes, "[Authority…] is always there, though it's often suppressed, disguised as craft, or common sense, or literary taste, or what-I-have-learned-in-twenty-years-of-being-a-writer. But, finally, it comes down to speaking about how texts mean, what they do, how they

exist in the world, how they function" (5). Shared texts provided an authority for me to examine writing through craft analysis and critical theory, but they did not provide opportunities to build relationships, to mentor students, and they did not initiate my students further into the discipline of writing. Teaching from shared texts still constructed my position as an authority, and I needed to construct my position as a mentor.

Positioned as a mentor, or as a teacher who writes, I would not need to talk authoritatively about the texts I loved, nod my disinterested head or find fault when my students shared work, or leave each class with a few summative comments that reinforced my authority. In the master-apprentice workshop format, I would have authority, but that authority would be adversarial to students (Domina 32), and, as I was learning, my students were willing to challenge my limited authority. The master-apprentice approach, focusing entirely on professional aspects, while dismissing the relational and role modeling traits of a mentor-protégé approach, would not function as the pedagogy of a discipline. However, if I returned to the knowledge I brought into the composition classroom, I thought, I might find an "appreciation of the discipline's typical way of approaching experience;" I might find an answer to my questions about teaching creative writing within my pedagogy of composition. I might also finish teaching this course in a way that acknowledged "the formation of knowledge is a social activity, that affective as well as intellectual assent is required" (Bizzell 145). As I began to focus again on students rather than texts, I could move away from the authority of the workshop and toward the discipline of mentorship.

On Questioning the Workshop Model

Since the first creative writing classes were developed, creative writing instruction has filled the space of the workshop with a hierarchal model, one built upon the master-apprentice relationship. In this model, young writers come together to craft literature and offer criticism to peers and instructor (Haake 80). Students become part of the weekly ritual, one where they write, photocopy, and discuss (Uppal 48), completing these tasks as performances before the instructor of the class. The instructor might direct discussion with an occasional comment or question, but usually students perform the same ritual their instructors learned to perform, following a "model of instruction over a hundred years old but basically unrevised" (Bizarro 296). Wallace Stegner, Iowa faculty during the program's formation, articulated this philosophy of creative writing pedagogy stating, "The teaching of writing is Socratic" (qtd. in Meyers 14). Stegner taught many of the twentieth-century writers who went on to become core faculty members of writing programs across America, and his Socratic stance continues to be present in writing programs. Such a broad overarching statement pulls the teaching of writing into a classical position, one that can be admired for its inherent openness, but seldom interrogated for its inherent difficulties. Bringing such a classical pedagogy into the twenty-first century assumes that the teaching of writing continues in a context similar to Stegner's Iowa. The status quo supremacy of the workshop is founded on a model assuming "that students already know how to write, that they are capable of determining whether a piece 'works,' that they are familiar with traditional and contemporary literature, that all they need to master the craft is a little practice before a critical, peer-audience" (Moxley xiv). In the early years of Iowa these assumptions may have been

correct, and the creative writing teacher may have been able to strike a Socratic pose in the classroom, providing only just the right question to prompt the revision that would create a refined piece of literary art, but time and location have changed the field of creative writing and the original design of creative writing workshops must be questioned.

As I hurried to design a course and worried I would fail in the effort, I chose not to question the authority of the workshop leader, not to claim the position of senior learner exploring the unknown in the classroom. I was concerned by my lack of knowledge about writing for young readers, and my solution was to find readings that would fill the space of my unknowing; but, my unknowing of this field was an open space I could have shared with my students, as I claimed the role of mentor and senior learner. In "Dismantling Authority," Katherine Haake writes, "If writing begins in the very moment of its own coming into being […] my guess is that teaching does too" (100). I knew this truth. Writing and teaching are more than performances of the known; they are explorations of the unknown.

In that moment when Allison sat in my office I could have asked her to claim her unknowing, as well, to read, learn, and teach along with me. We could have chosen readings to share together, and we could have talked about each selection "without either lionizing it or tearing it apart, but simply naming techniques used and exploring their effects" (Kearns 802). Such discussions would have built our mutual knowledge of the texts we read, would have allowed us to explore the construction of the stories. Haake suggests, "We should encourage students not just to read, but to look beyond the lure of the idealized text, of any one form of reading/writing as privileged over another. [… as] the role of reading in the creative writing classroom must itself be an explicit subject of investigation" (21-2). The important question, I

believed, was *what* and *who* we read. I should have asked the other questions: *how*, *when*, *where*, and, most definitely, *why*. I should have embraced our collective unknowing.

Too often workshops become a space where teachers and students alike settle into the comfortable positions of our certain knowing, of masters and apprentices, rather than allowing the workshop to become a place where writers are developed, a place of mentors and protégés. Acknowledging our uncertainty and our unknowing allows student writers to question, to explore the potential of their craft, and it allows mentors to develop the potential of their protégés. Acknowledging such uncertainty in the future will require that I mentor my students, that I release authority and embrace relationships with my students and their work, that I create a workshop that will provide space for students to investigate and claim their own literary influences. Such uncertainly will require my students to loosen their embrace of performance and testimony. My students and I longed for certainty, and, in seeking those certainties, we allowed our insecurities to lead us toward familiar roles. I allowed myself to claim the role of master, defining many of the readings in the class, and Allison allowed herself to claim the role of apprentice, asking for rules her writing might obey.

After Allison left my office, I went to a local bookstore, and I found a book on writing for young readers that offered a list of rules. That list, when presented, was challenged immediately by writers in the classroom. I started the process, asking my students to offer exceptions to the rules, and my students responded. Until the end of the semester, nearly every book we shared— books chosen by students, who found their own literary heritage, and, then, created an annotated bibliography to teach me about the discipline of writing for young readers—nearly every book turned into an example of an author who challenged the rules list, and students' stories also

consciously challenged those rules. Katherine Haake writes to her students that the classes she will teach will have "no known outcome" (103), and I've learned those unknown outcomes can lead teachers who are writers—and writers who are teachers—toward the work of unknowing creative writing pedagogy.

The pedagogy of unknowing has the potential to liberate students to write into the unknown spaces, toward their knowing, and the pedagogy of unknowing has the potential to liberate teachers to teach into the unknown space outside of the current-traditional workshop model, toward a future of creative writing pedagogy that—I hope—will remain unknown. The authority of the traditional workshop and the position of the teacher did not help my students learn, so I'm choosing to reject those antiquated, ineffectual pedagogies. Those pedagogies were designed for students in a time and place where I do not teach. My students, in this moment, in the places I teach, have different needs, so I will continue to develop the courses I teach with portfolios, conferences, and student selected texts. I will continue to work toward the position of mentor, rather than the role of master. Then, I will leave open space in the workshop; I will prepare for the unexpected arrival of the unknown.

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