



“There’s An Essay In That”: Wendy Bishop and the Origins of Our Field

Stephanie Vanderslice

University of Central Arkansas

stephv@uca.edu

As a beginning creative writing scholar, Wendy Bishop’s death was a watershed moment for me. Like the Challenger explosion, and the 9/11 attacks, I remember exactly where I was when I learned about it. It was a Sunday morning in late November 2003 and I had gone into my office to pick up some papers. I sat down at my desk for a just moment to glance at my email when the news came over the WPA list-serv.

First I remember feeling stunned and grieved. How could this be? The last news I’d heard was that Bishop was doing well, poised to overcome the leukemia that she had been diagnosed with some months earlier—after all, she always looked so healthy. If anyone could defeat leukemia handily, Wendy could. Right?

But what I felt mostly, for months, for years, afterward was lost. A young creative writer and scholar whose world had only just (or so it seemed) been cracked wide open by Bishop’s work and whose nascent career, like that of dozens of others, owed so much to her generous mentoring, I simply could not imagine what we would do without her.

Twelve years on is a reassuring vantage point from which to answer that question. To look at where Bishop left us, what and who she left us with, and what we went all on to do with that legacy. Which brings us to the current historical moment in creative writing studies history—a rich one indeed—at what we can work toward and what the future might bring.

WHAT AND WHO SHE LEFT US WITH:

To say that Wendy Bishop, along with her frequent collaborators Kate Haake, Hans Ostrum, and David Starkey, had left us a significant foundation to build would be an understatement. Any way you look at her seminal works in creative writing theory, arguably, *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Pedagogy*, *Released into Language: Some Options for Teaching Creative Writing*, and the essay “Places to Stand. The Reflective Writer-Teacher in Composition.” as well as the many other essays that appeared after her death, they form a sizeable launching pad for the next generation of scholarship.

But Bishop didn’t just leave us her work. She left us a legacy that was a way of being as a scholar, a way of engaging with academia that was generous and considered, that was civil and dare I say, kind.

The type of scholar she modeled was not an agonistic¹ but a collaborative and inclusive one, a scholar who did not seek to claim her turf and stick a flag on it but to look for ways to find common ground. She also mentored dozens of junior scholars around the country, casting handfuls of seeds on fields far and wide at a time when Web 2.0 was just beginning to glimmer above the horizon. As I write these words, exchanging emails with gifted young scholars who know her only through her work, about creative writing journals, conferences, organizations, I can see those seeds starting to bloom.

Let me take a few steps back to explain just what I mean here. Although I knew her work on creative writing pedagogy inside and out, I did not know Wendy Bishop well and only spent a few days with her in late 1999. But those days had a profound effect on me. For one thing, in the 48 hours she spent as a visiting writer at my university, Bishop made deliberate, conscious attempts to mentor me. She asked me what I was working on, how my publishing agenda was going. When I described a particularly discouraging rejection from one journal, she asked to see the essay. Then she brought it to her hotel room that night and, at some point the next day, in between a speaking engagement and a poetry class she was guest teaching in, she found time to sit down with me and go over what she thought I needed to do to get it published. She asked me what else I was working on. She asked me what I thought were the important issues in creative writing pedagogy. When we commiserated on issues that came up often in the creative writing classroom, she would put up her hand, forefinger extended as if touching something palpable in the air and note, “There’s an essay in that!”

Those five words changed my academic life. Possibilities for writing began to emerge from my classroom and in my writing-process-life on an almost daily basis until at some point in the past decade I started to murmur it myself. Now I find myself repeating it to graduate students and to other scholars—(although I spare them the finger in the air—that was *her* signature gesture). Try it sometime. It’s a great way of looking at the world we teach in.

Wendy also changed my life by agreeing to contribute an essay to *Can It Really Be Taught*, the collection on lore and creative writing Kelly Ritter and I were trying to get off the ground through Heinemann at the time. We invited several critical names to contribute and most agreed—to our great relief—but Wendy got on board right away, giving our project street cred with all the other scholars. I believe she knew exactly what she was doing in backing our project, knew that her support would be essential in getting the book launched. It has remained an influential text and at the ten-year mark, Becca Manery and I will be reissuing a new anniversary edition through Bloomsbury Academic that will be doubled in size and will feature a raft of new scholars.

I tell this story not because it’s unusual but because *it’s not*. Some years after Bishop died, Anna Leahy and I collaborated with several other scholars for an essay in an edited collection called *Stories of Mentoring* on all the ways in which Wendy had mentored us. The book debuted at the four C’s conference in 2007 and as we each read from our part of the essay, all of us, it was striking to be in that room and hear the ripple effect Bishop’s mentoring had had. The way she had struck up a correspondence

1. For more on the agonistic scholarship that frequently characterizes academia, see Walter S. Ong’s book *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality and Consciousness*.

with one young woman who'd written her a fan letter, or how she had carried on epistolary email relationships with others. Hearing those stories confirmed for me, and, I think, Anna, how powerful mentoring can be and we made a pact that day to mentor others in our field, a pact we have honored. Every time I am approached by a graduate student or junior scholar, I think about what Wendy did for me and how I can pay that forward. Want me to write you a letter of recommendation, review your book proposal, write the introduction to your book or blurb it, look over your cv or meet you for lunch to confirm that indeed, the administrator at your university really does sound crazy and probably won't last long? The answer is usually yes. I'm here to help.

Why do I do these things? Well, yes, because Wendy did them for me and because they are good things to do and because I think, as I am sure she innately understood, they move our field forward. All this mentoring slowly transfers knowledge and encourages innovation from one generation to the next. That's how a discipline grows. After Wendy mentored all of us, we reached out to all of the people you are reading here in this journal and seeing in the masthead and hearing about in the organization and the upcoming conference. It all links back to her.²

Before I move on to look toward the future of our field, I want to say one more thing about what Wendy Bishop modeled for us, and that's collaboration. Collaboration was second nature to Bishop, as evidenced by the many books she co-edited and co-authored with others. It's proof that she not only enjoyed what I think of as the highest kind of discourse—an intellectual give and take rather than rabid attack-and-retreat turf-guarding that can characterize others in academia—but that she also shared the wealth, often inviting others to converse and co-author with her. Anna Leahy and I have consciously tried to follow Wendy in this path. We have collaborated on many occasions—on essays, Huffington Post Blogs and conference presentations, with each other and with other scholars—in order to advance our field as a whole and because, I think, we are genuinely kindred spirits. But we have also disagreed at times—and we have done so civilly. And while we have followed different artistic paths, we have always championed one another's work.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE: HONORING A UNIQUE HERITAGE

In considering the last twelve years, since we've been working together, Anna and I recently had a chance to discuss our relationship in the context of the field as a whole and we hope it's one that, like Bishop's influence before us, sets the tone for our discipline and sets it apart. What if our discipline became known as one in which new ideas were cultivated and made room for instead of contested, where junior scholars were nurtured and mentored and where creative work was understood to be an important component of the teaching writer's life? As creative writing scholars, we have a chance to

2. Of course, it does not only link back to Wendy Bishop but Katherine Haake, Joseph Moxley, Hans Ostrum, Mary Ann Cain, Patrick Bizzaro and many others who pioneered the field. I'd like to single out Patrick Bizzaro here as a scholar who has also followed Bishop's tradition as a collaborative, inclusive and profoundly generous and innovative mentor who leads our discipline and also provides a model for us all.

be different, to emphasize the *writing* part of what labels us - for that is what we are, after all, at heart. Writers. Sometimes I think scholars in corollary fields lose sight of that fact and it's to their, and especially our students', detriment. We are teachers who write and we need to maintain that identity.

Lastly, in looking toward the future, it's always good to dream a little for we all know the famous quote that in dreams begin possibilities. This past year my university was hiring a poet and one of the possible secondary specialties we were looking for was someone who also had a background in creative writing pedagogy. We came very close to hiring that person—close enough that I began to dream of all that we could do with an MFA program that had not one but two specialists in this field—but alas our candidate chose to go somewhere else (no hard feelings, I promise). However, it started me thinking that this is the direction our discipline needs to go in. A great deal has been mentioned about how difficult it is to define our field, especially in the job market. I think the first step will be for a university to make the bold move to set out to create a graduate program that specializes in this discipline. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee seems to be coming the closest to doing this right now; that is, the Rhetoric and Writing program has influenced many students to think about creative writing pedagogy. Perhaps some of us eventually need to get into administration to steer programs in this direction—something not all of us are suited for—but it is a goal to think about as we look toward the future. It's definitely something I think about as an MFA director and as our university looks toward creating programs of distinction. What if our next step was to build a small Ph.D. program in Creative Writing Pedagogy? What if another university did? What would that look like? Our university was one of the first to offer a creative writing pedagogy course fifteen years ago—perhaps we can start to think about a sequence of such courses, including digital creative writing pedagogy.

Rhetoric and Composition was in this position thirty years ago and now programs in that discipline criss-cross the country. Given the state that the undergraduate humanities finds itself in and the fact that creative writing courses seem to be one of the few growth areas within it, an argument might be made that a graduate field of study concentrated around teaching those courses might be worth cultivating. If we want to move forward, this is something everyone reading these words needs to consider if they sit at tables where job descriptions are written and hiring decisions are made.

Finally, let me end this essay by reiterating how truly hopeful I am—and that's not easy to say in academia these days. Wendy Bishop was just one person. Granted, she was by all accounts incredibly energetic and prolific but she was still just one person. Look at what her legacy has borne. If we continue to carry it out, all of us, if we continue to act according to her principles, the ones I have laid out here, the possibilities for our discipline and for all of us and those who follow us are endless.

WORKS CITED

Bishop, Wendy and Hans Ostrum. *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy*. Urbana: NCTE, 1994. Print.

“Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition.” *College Composition and Communication*. 51, 1 (1999): 9-31. Print.

Released into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing. 2nd ed. Portland, ME: Calendar Islands, 1998. Print.

Eble, Michelle F. and Lynee Lewis Galliet, eds. *Stories of Mentoring: Theory and Practice*. Lauer Series in Rhetoric and Composition. Ed. Patricia Sullivan, Catherine Hobbs, Thomas Rickert, and Jennifer Bay. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2008.

Ritter, Kelly and Stephanie Vanderslice. *Can It Really Be Taught? Rethinking Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007. Print.