



Making Space for Creative Writing Research in the Academy

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Dianne Donnelly's *Establishing Creative Writing as an Academic Discipline* begins with a metaphor and a provocation:

The field of creative writing stands once again at a crossroads. On one side of the road is a course of study, a 'discipline' that is unaware of the histories and theories that inform its practice.... On the other side of the road is *creative writing studies*, an emerging field of scholarly inquiry and research. As an academic discipline, it explores and challenges the pedagogy of creative writing.
(1)

The hallmark of an academic discipline is its research—the systematic investigation of some question or problem—that scholars share via conference papers, vet through peer review, and disseminate in scholarly publications. For many creative writing instructors, publishing creative work counts *as research* for tenure and promotion, despite the fact that writing a short story or poem for a literary magazine is a very different thing than writing a journal article that synthesizes theories and cites multiple sources. Creative writing's lack of recognizable academic research is complicated further when one considers the volumes of theoretically grounded work produced by our peers in composition and professional writing. Scholars in these field make it clear that different types of writing can be studied and theorized like any other academic discipline; it's just that very few creative writers seem to do it. More troublingly, many creative writers don't seem to know it even exists.

But so what? After all, despite the lack of scholarly publications, creative writing has managed to find a niche in the academy, and our classes tend to be popular—perhaps specifically *because* students understand that they provide an outlet for creativity. Yet it's not to students that we need to justify the discipline of creative writing's continued existence. The landscape of higher education has changed in significant ways in the last two decades and, thanks to the corporatization of the university, we find ourselves in an era of continual program assessment. Public funding of higher education has steadily receded, tuition has risen, and it's common for students to graduate with five-figure debts and few job prospects. Scrutiny of higher education, and specifically the worth of the humanities, is at an all-time

high. This is particularly true if the degree listed on a student's diploma doesn't map directly onto an established profession. Physical campus space is at a premium, and tenured and tenure-track faculty are an expensive operating cost. To cope with the strain, universities have turned to hiring armies of low paid adjunct instructors to handle first-year writing assignments; many administrators seem content to sacrifice educational integrity for squeezing a few more students into each class, while others shunt classes online to instructors unprepared to teach in that environment. Writing programs feel this pressure keenly because those instructors must provide regular, individualized feedback on every student's work. All told, creative writing may very well begin to look like expensive electives—"fun" courses that no employers desire, and a cost that can no longer be borne given the rising price tag of higher education.

Thus, despite its present popularity, creative writing's position in the academy feels tenuous. Every discipline needs to be prepared for routine program assessments that ask seemingly innocuous questions like: What are your course objectives? How do your teaching methods help students reach them? How do you measure whether students are succeeding? This is hardly the Spanish Inquisition yet creative writing instructors often take umbrage at such a bureaucratic invasion. While answering such questions can feel like busywork, they also present an opportunity for faculty to explain to administration what their discipline actually *does* and why it's valuable. Perhaps the problem isn't so much the questioning but rather that creative writing instructors can't articulate our answers as well as we should.

When I discuss this issue with other creative writers, often the first line of defense is along the lines of *l'art pour l'art*, or art for art's sake. As a practicing fiction writer, of course I subscribe to the idea that artistic craft has intrinsic worth—but I also understand this argument possibly won't faze an administrator looking for a more concrete justification. Other answers I've heard include that studying creative writing makes students better readers, or that it increases their enjoyment of literature, or that it improves their facility with language. These reasons are even *worse*. Literary study is already in the business of teaching close reading and the benefits of literature, and composition and professional writing can justly claim that their students' work closely aligns with the writing situations students will face once they enter their professions. Furthermore, the other branches of writing studies have embraced structured assessment and demonstrable learning outcomes for students. They produce an ongoing body of theoretically grounded research—books, articles, conferences—that informs their pedagogy. It's well past time that creative writers commit to establishing an equivalent body of research for our own field.

AWP: AN ACADEMIC WRITER'S PROBLEM?

The Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) frames the discipline differently. On their website's History page they write that

In schools of political science, economics, medicine, architecture, engineering, and business, the most respected teachers were the practitioners of those disciplines—those professors who divide their time between theory and practice, between speculation and pragmatism, between work in academe and work in “the real world.” Oddly, English departments once included few living practitioners of the art of making literature, although they included many practitioners of criticism and scholarship. The founders of AWP argued that the understanding and appreciation of literature could be enhanced by having practitioners of that art teach that art. It was a radical notion at some institutions, and positions for writers in many departments were hard-won. (“Our History”)

Let’s ignore the self-congratulatory tone of this description and delve into what makes this historical accounting problematic. It’s a curious claim to say that “most respected teachers were practitioners of those disciplines” without any supporting evidence. Respected by whom? And by what criteria? Even if we were to assume that this was true in the late 1960s at AWP’s founding, is there any evidence this is still the case today? Regardless, the comparison puts creative writing at a disadvantage since the disciplines listed map directly onto specific careers—physicians, architects, engineers, and entrepreneurs—and the two that don’t (political science and economics) are practical and applicable for many different career fields, particularly journalism. These disciplines are all well-positioned to handle the shift in higher education toward job preparedness in ways creative writing simply isn’t.

The history continues with a laundry list of Big Name Authors who enrolled in or taught creative writing classes at the university level. It’s an impressive list but, unsurprisingly, they leave out other notable writers like Hanif Kureishi, who calls creative writing courses “a waste of time” (Flood). They ignore the frequent firestorms caused by MFA exposés like Ryan Boudinot’s “Things I Can Say About MFA Writing Programs Now That I No Longer Teach in One,” (Boudinot) or Junot Diaz’s description of his unhappy experience in an MFA program due to the lack of diversity (Diaz), or Anis Shivani’s book *Against the Workshop: Provocations, Polemics, Controversies*, or any of the articles that pops up every few months that asks whether creative writing can really be taught. This widespread and very public scrutiny about the efficacy of creative writing as a teachable subject stands in jarring contrast to AWP’s sense of self-satisfaction. No one thinks to ask whether political science, economics, medicine, architecture, engineering, or business can be taught.

What I find most frustrating with these debates revolving around whether creative writing can be taught is how often the opposing sides are arguing at cross-purposes. When we’re making various claims about “creative writing,” are we talking about elite MFA programs in small liberal arts schools, or multigenre general education undergraduate courses at a large public university? When we talk about the shortcomings of the “workshop model,” which of the many related classroom approaches are we actually critiquing? Is our aim to teach students how to submit a polished manuscript to a literary magazine, or to learn to express ideas through creative writing, or to introduce them to the current literary scene? These are necessary distinctions to make if want debates to get us anywhere: I am talking about *this* and not *that*. While creative writers have craft jargon—we understand how enjambment differs from an end-stopped line of poetry, for example—we sorely lack a corresponding

understanding of teaching practices and philosophies of creative writing as a discipline, save for a nebulous conception of “the workshop.” Thus as a discipline, we find ourselves in the Sisyphean struggle of continually justifying our place in the academy rather than parsing criticisms and answering such questions authoritatively and definitively.

The mismanagement of the public perception of creative writing in the academy rests with AWP and their steadfast refusal to recognize the need for research to inform our practice. In their online Guidelines for Creative Writing Programs & Teachers of Creative Writing, they state that “academic degrees should not be considered a requirement or a major criterion which would overrule the importance of the writer’s achievement in the art” and, bafflingly, that the MFA remains the preferred credential for academic hires. Their description of the MFA experience is almost entirely craft-based; they make no mention of pedagogy, teaching experience, or theory beyond that of craft. When the professional organization goes out of their way to relegate academic degrees to a secondary issue when describing their *preferred* qualification, it’s no surprise when high profile writers in the academy like David Gilmour says he’s not interested in teaching fiction by women (Errett), or we read through our fingers about Gordon Lish’s leering pedagogy of seduction (Blumenkranz). Iconoclasts in the academy? Or public embarrassments to the profession?

The AWP publication *The Writer’s Chronicle* as well as their annual conference are equally vexing. Their magazine (note: not a journal) describes itself as “accessible, pragmatic, and idealistic” (“Writer’s Chronicle”) and is virtually indistinguishable from *Writer’s Digest*, *Poets & Writers*, or any other popular magazine targeting writers; likewise, the conference is a hodgepodge of readings, events, and panels with no dedicated track for academic presentations. Their submission guidelines limit proposals to 500 *characters* including spaces—that roughly translates to 75 words, or about three sentences—and do not require any citations. Even for a skilled writer, it’s nearly impossible to express any complex academic concern within such confinements. Thus the quality of the panels varies wildly, where one speaker’s anecdotes contrasts with another’s well-sourced research. While uneven panels are common at academic conferences, it’s mystifying to see so many presenters appearing to be speaking off the tops of their heads without referencing or even recognizing other relevant studies on the topic.

In other significant ways, AWP has been wildly successfully. The enormous attendance at their conference and book fair demonstrates that they connect writers working in academic settings to the broader, non-academic literary public. However, this leads to an uncomfortable question: if creative writing’s largest professional organization proudly espouses a non-academic stance and seeks to reach a popular audience, might not critics start asking why creative writing needs a place in the academy at all? After all, plenty of published authors run their own writing courses for a fee, and dozens of online writing workshops offer similar services—all at a fraction of the cost of a university credit. And if creative writing instructors *inside* the academy have no formal training in how to teach writing, then how is it any different than the author running his or her own workshop out of the local bookstore? To put it another way, many university creative writing programs often offer an experience very similar to what’s available in the private sector, only at an inflated price. To a skeptic, it would appear that writers need space in the academy more than the academy needs what writers offer.

CREATIVE WRITING AND ITS ACADEMIC CONTEXT(S)

Reversing this situation is actually quite straightforward: college-level creative writing courses should deliver experiences that students *can't* get anywhere else. In fact, given the recent push to broaden STEM education (an acronym for science, technology, engineering, and math) to STEAM (adding arts to the mix), creative writing has a genuine opportunity to become a vital part of the 21st-century university. My fear is that creative writing is more likely to participate in what I'm calling STEMA—a nonsense word with the 'A' for the arts tacked on the end—rather than establishing itself as an integrated part of a broad educational project. In order for creative writing to occupy any type of vital position in the rapidly changing landscape of higher education, creative writers must begin interrogating our discipline in a rigorous fashion. We must enunciate the tangible benefits we offer our students, recognizing that our discrete goals will differ from program to program, even class to class; we must examine common teaching practices and distinguish between idiosyncratic successes and replicable approaches; we must envision a broader scope for our practice that extends beyond the production of print-based literary texts and delves into uncharted digital spaces; we should seek out collaborative experiences across departments and colleges in order to infuse other disciplines with our artistic spirit and flavorful use of language; we need dedicated space to share our findings and debate their implications. In short, we need to make creative writing research central, rather than peripheral, to our discipline.

For my own part, I stumbled onto creative writing studies as a graduate student. I was assembling my reading list for preliminary PhD exams and for one of my minor areas, I had selected digital writing pedagogy across the fields of composition, professional writing, and creative writing. While the first two fields had ample material to select from—*Computers and Composition* had been publishing for almost 25 *years* at that point—I was stunned by the difficulty I faced in locating a body of research that examined creative writing of *any* sort, much less work dedicated to digital creative writing. Up until that point, as a practicing fiction writer, I hadn't thought much about how or why we taught creative writing at all. Had I not chosen this minor area for my prelims, I would have remained blissfully unaware of creative writing studies, even though I was earning a PhD in the subject. It's little wonder that it escapes the notice of so many students, especially in programs that emphasize craft above all else.

Of course, it must be said that creative writing research *already* exist and the quality is quite high. The New Writing Viewpoints series has a dozen books and continues to grow; at the time of writing, the Bloomsbury Academic has also been aggressively expanding their catalog of books on creative writing studies. The journals *New Writing* and *TEXT*, both of which focus on creative writing, have been around for over ten and nearly twenty years respectively. However, all of the above publishers and publications are based either in the United Kingdom or Australia, where creative writing in the academy has a different history and the enmity between theory and creative production does not exist as it does in the US. Those of us early in our careers owe much to the trailblazers who have been

fighting for decades to make space for creative writing research in US universities. Their hard work appears to be bearing fruit, as the number of academics interested in this field is growing rapidly.

The goal of the *Journal of Creative Writing Studies* is to further widen the space for the research-minded subset of creative writers in the academy who want more disciplinary coherence than what AWP currently provides. This goal has two parts: increasing the volume of well-sourced creative writing research, and increasing the visibility of this work within the academic community. All parties associated with creative writing in higher education will benefit from this project. For those working in academic settings that recognize and encourage artistic achievement in writing, creative writing research grounds and validates our successful practices using language that makes sense to scholars from different disciplines; for those in institutions that focus their energy on applied degrees, creative writing research provides evidence of the thoughtful and practical value of the skills we teach.

Many of us trust that this first issue of *Journal of Creative Writing Studies* will mark the beginning of a new era for creative writing in the academy. We are working on a Creative Writing Studies Conference to be held in fall 2016 designed specifically for sharing creative writing research; we are also working on the Creative Writing Studies Organization (CWSO), a membership organization whose board of directors will help direct the journal and conference, as well as chart a path for our profession for the decades to come. AWP has presided over creative writing in the academy for almost half a century, and the success of their conference and book fair is a laudable achievement. Our goal is not to compete with, but rather complement, that work by providing venues for the dissemination of creative writing research. It's our hope that by making space for creative writing research and raising the profile of creative writing as an academic discipline, we can influence the next generation of creative writing instructors—today's graduate students—and in doing so change the conversation surrounding creative writing place in the academy.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Shortly after writing this article, I had the good fortune to read Dianne Donnelly and Graeme Harper's *Key Issues in Creative Writing*, published in 2012. Several essays in this collection, particularly Donnelly's "Reshaping Creative Writing: Power and Agency in the Academy" and Mimi Thebo's "Hey Babe, Take a Walk on the Wild Side—Creative Writing in Universities," make many similar observations to those I describe in this essay. It would be disingenuous to simply attach citations retroactively, and such an action would also obscure the fact that the ideas expressed in my essay were independently conceived, yet are neither particularly original nor new. If this essay does nothing more than encouraging readers to seek out this and other collections of excellent scholarship pertaining to our field, it will have been a success.

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