



Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing: Threshold Concepts to Guide the Literary Writing Curriculum

John Vigna

University of British Columbia

john.vigna@ubc.ca

Review of

Adsit, Janelle. *Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing: Threshold Concepts to Guide the Literary Writing Curriculum*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017. Print.

Recently, a colleague and I were discussing “voice” as it applies to writing fiction. We bantered over timeworn questions: What does it mean to find one’s voice? Can a writer ever find their own voice? How is voice influenced by those around us, those we are in conversation with? Can this voice change or is it fixed? Our conversations moved, as they often do from our writing practice to our teaching practice and became more problematic: Can we encourage our students to find their voice if we haven’t provided access to a plurality of voices in our classes? Where does this voice come from and what does it say about who we are?

Viet Than Nguyen, the Pulitzer-Prize winning author of *The Refugees*, in a 2017 New York Times Book Review piece, called the workshop “a model of pedagogy that is also an object lesson in how power propagates and conceals itself.” Nguyen’s challenge of the traditional creative writing workshop was also raised by Claudia Rankine, Junot Díaz, and others who posited that the failure of most workshops to address matters of politics and identity leads to hostility towards writers of color, to the suppression of voices and to bland creative work.

Inclusivity begins with creating safe spaces for everyone to explore, experiment, take risks, fall down, pick themselves up, and try all over again. How else can one begin to access their voice without a safe space where a plurality of diverse voices is present? But how are safe spaces created if all of these voices are not represented? How can we earn the trust of our students to take risks if we as instructors do not move from the way we’ve always done things towards a more representative classroom?

Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing: Threshold Concepts

Janelle Adsit's seminal text, *Toward an Inclusive Creative Writing: Threshold Concepts to Guide the Literary Writing Curriculum*, makes a timely, provocative, and convincing case for the inclusive classroom and challenges instructors and institutions to transform their curriculum and workshop practices. The book is a pedagogy and teaching master class through its scaffolded organization, which offers a well-constructed and supported model of inclusion for instructors committed to challenging their pedagogy and teaching practice. It's required reading for any creative writing instructor (and student) working in the discipline today.

Adsit's central argument is that "students in creating writing should learn how to write difference and identity in ways that demonstrate critical consciousness" (11). She makes the case that "core unexamined beliefs... produce systemic barriers" (11) for some students to access creative writing curriculum. Starting with the VIDA Count to identify representation across literary publications, Adsit notes the underrepresentation of women, particularly women of color, and that the VIDA Count "indicates something about how the field has constructed the figure of the writer" (16). Creative writing programs "sustain a set of assumptions about what and who can be valued in creative writing" (16). The Count reveals biases that shape our literary landscape, what VIDA calls "literary nepotism" (16). The VIDA Count, asserts Adsit, "asks for pedagogical change in practice" (16); it is the responsibility of teachers in the discipline to "move toward a more inclusive creative writing pedagogy by uncovering the ways that the myth of aesthetic meritocracy has blinded us to inequity" (16). She borrows from Peggy McIntosh's "unpacking privilege" exercise (17) for creative writing instructors and students to "uncover and expose the forms of privilege that have sustained this myth of aesthetic meritocracy" (17).

This exercise, positioned at an early juncture in the text, challenges instructors to actively assess their own biases inherited as part of creative writing's legacy, and move toward an openness in testing their teaching practice. If a student doesn't learn, we haven't taught them well. Teaching is more than rethinking our pedagogy and courses—it's about being a decent human being and connecting with our students. The exercises throughout the book may be difficult and uncomfortable for some, but by confronting our blind spots, we bring humility and sense of learning into our classes; it's likely that our students, too, will join the journey.

Adsit nimbly tears down exclusionary assumptions of writers and writing that "marginalize" (20) and systematically shatters the precarious grip they have held over creative writing for over one hundred years. Notions of the lonely writer (23), leisure and unalienated labor (26), the writer as exceptional (30), elitism and genius (42) are examined against the different pedagogical practices they have shaped: progressive (32), humanistic (34), professionalizing (36), auditioning (38), experimental (39), and therapeutic (41).

She dismantles the historical weight of a “teacher-centered hierarchy” in creative writing (50) that serves as “gatekeeper, protecting and preserving the literary values of the discipline” (50). A “discipline-centered” pedagogical approach rather than a “student-centered approach.” This “privileged discourse” (50) that creative writing has long upheld, must transform toward an inclusive creative writing curriculum that advocates “diverse and versatile aesthetic knowledge and practice” (50). Adsit warns that craft-based teaching in the discipline-centred model can be a “canon of tastemaking principles” (58) that “teach the conventions of ‘sophisticated’ literature (60). “This ‘pedagogy of taste’ also operates as a ‘pedagogy of shame,’ which is preoccupied with outside/insider status” (62).

In holding up a mirror to reflect back the history and unchallenged assumptions creative writing has had embedded since its origin as an academic discipline, Adsit devotes much of the book to twelve threshold concepts that “can serve to transform the teaching of literary creative writing craft into an opportunity for critical reflection on cultural production in its diversity and range” (3). These concepts focus on what Adsit considers “critical principles that are important for writers to engage” (77) and they are ways of “naming facets of disciplinary thinking” (77). These organizing devices, or thresholds, include: “attention” (75), “creativity” (83), “authorship” (91), “language” (94), “genre” (96), “craft” (97), “community” (98), “evaluation” (101), “representation” (104), “resistance” (107), “theory” (108), and “revision” (110).

The threshold concepts encourage instructors to focus on investing in their students by providing both depth and breadth in diversity to create a more inclusive fluency. Is this what differentiates an average or good creative writing teacher from a truly transformative one?

Adsit generously shares a variety of resources for instructors, both in the book and on her website. She includes a sample syllabus, reading lists, a framework for evaluating equity and inclusion in BA and MFA programs, tips for reading as a writer, etc. She offers an enquiry-based workshop model (similar to Liz Lerner’s Critical Response Process or Jesse Ball’s Notes On My Dunce Cap) where the writer being workshopped participates in the discussion rather than remains silent. Perhaps case studies and examples from her classroom would offer more insight into the difficult conversations and challenges she has encountered in applying this approach in her classes. What are some of the strategies, both successful and unsuccessful, that she has tried, and how might she (and instructors) learn from them? Case studies, incorporating examples of typical scenarios that arise, would help provide more real-life context to an otherwise theoretical approach.

Also, how would these threshold concepts and approach be received by the 70% of all faculty represented by nontenure-track instructors (139) who lack job security and financial incentive to devote more time to re-considering their pedagogy with so many risks inherent in the model? Adjunct instructors and tenured/tenure-track faculty alike will surely select concepts and practices that they can manage given their own respective constraints, but the potential consequences for things to go

awry in the short-term might operate as a disincentive to try for Adjuncts. Are there suggestions for how the largest segment of our teaching population might manage these?

Adsit's book challenges us all to think more deeply and actively about cultural fluency, and how we need to relentlessly build and add to our knowledge base in order to teach young writers who more accurately reflect the diverse world we live in. It's an iterative process. It can feel overwhelming to learn more about a community we don't know well. It requires attentive scaffolding and planning. But we owe our students that level of diligence. Isn't discomfort a key step in learning?

In an inclusive classroom, it can be a good reminder that we need to be comfortable with being uncomfortable, especially instructors who must confront our own biases and pedagogical philosophy constantly, who must face our students daily and articulate our intention in creating a safe space for exploration. By re-evaluating courses for inclusivity, we face the difficulty and necessity of looking at it all from the student's perspective rather than our own. This requires letting go of power and authority and bringing more humility, more humanity to the classroom. Through the process, we re-evaluate ourselves as writers, instructors, and human beings. It's a reminder of what a great privilege it is for us to teach, to be students ourselves, and aspire to be upright human beings for the students who have placed their faith and trust in us. Janelle Adsit's important and timely book reminds that our responsibility in honouring this privilege is to try and provide a transformational learning experience for our students by providing a framework for them to explore diverse voices as they work towards articulating their own, one that might just change their lives.