

PEDAGOGY

Pedagogy is the profession, art, and science of teaching. However, for a keyword with such an apparently innocuous definition, pedagogy inspires in many teachers of creative writing a surprising level of fear and loathing. This loathing—perhaps “apathy” is closer to the truth—is rooted to a large degree in American writers’ very real *professional* knowledge that most four-year colleges and universities reward publication rather than

teaching. As every undergraduate soon learns, faculty members at prestigious institutions are there because their writing has been showered with honors; venerated presses have published their books. Candidates for college creative writing positions don't get the "best" jobs for designing innovative classroom assignments: they are hired because they have entered a book contest and won first prize. From this perspective, of course, there is no need to learn how to teach well. In fact, doing so will only interfere with one's writing time. Ergo, only writers with weak creative publications have to worry about pedagogy.

If the current system of hiring and retaining creative writers makes pedagogy a nasty word for many aspiring poets and novelists, we can find further support for that point of view in the word's etymology. Pedagogy comes from "pedagogue," which is derived from the Greek word *paidagogus*, meaning a boy's tutor. Some scholars claim that a pedagogue was not even a tutor but simply the attendant who led the child to school. A renowned creative writer teaching graduate students at a major university can hardly be expected to embrace a field of study that is linguistically linked with early childhood education. Indeed, over time the word "pedagogue" has taken on increasingly distasteful associations, so that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word is now normally used "in a more or less contemptuous or hostile sense, with implication of pedantry, dogmatism, or severity."

When she began writing *Released into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing* in the late 1980s, Wendy Bishop soon found that most of her senior colleagues shared this contempt for pedagogy. Bishop had just finished an MFA in creative writing and was turning her attention toward a PhD in rhetoric and composition. Yet as she worked on her dissertation, she discovered that the ideas and methods she was learning about and applying to her beginning composition courses also worked effectively with her beginning creative writing classes, and she soon came to believe that separating creative writing from composition and rhetoric was an unnatural act. After all, she reasoned, in the eighteenth century—to name just one obvious example—writers wrote across genres all the time and without giving the matter a second thought. A work of "literature" could as easily be an essay by Johnson or Swift as a poem by Dryden or Pope. Indeed, Johnson and Swift also wrote poetry; Dryden and Pope wrote prose. Writers certainly kept the boundaries of genre in mind, but they switched genres whenever their primary mode of writing was inadequate for the occasion at hand.

However, in American higher education of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, pedagogy and creative writing were seen as, at best, distant cousins. Rather than studying the latest achievements in education or in rhetoric and composition, many current creative writing teachers have, ironically, looked centuries into the past for their models. These instructors see pedagogy as an *art*. In the tradition of Renaissance painters, they have invited apprentices into their studios—the MFA, after all, is a “studio degree.” Novelist Nicholas Delbanco situates the master-apprentice relationship all the way back in the Middle Ages, viewing college-level education as a version of the craftsmen’s guilds: “After a period of learning, the writer receives a kind of walking paper that permits him to post as a journeyman-laborer and enter the guild; then, ideally, he has the chance of becoming a master craftsman and having people report to him” (1994, 59). In this workshop (q.v.) model, trainees both marvel at their masters’ skills and scrutinize and emulate the methods by which the older craftspeople generate their effects. An artist before she is anything else, the teacher relies on her individual genius to teach her students. Rather than formulating a systematic method of instruction that can be applied to all, or most, of her students, she simply follows her muse, imparting insights as they occur to her, before heading home to her “real work.” According to Hans Ostrom, the attitude of such writers is ““Out of my way—I have classes to get through and novels to write”” (1994, xiii).

The *science* of pedagogy, however, would argue that these master teachers’ assumptions that most of their students ultimately won’t measure up may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. According to George Hillock, a teacher’s effectiveness is directly related to his belief that his students’ work will improve: “Teachers . . . who are not optimistic about their students will have no reason to change. Because [these teachers] so seldom engage in reflective practice, they will have little evidence of any need to change. And because they have low expectations of their students, they will not be surprised when their students fail to learn” (1999, 134). While Hillock is referring primarily to secondary school teachers, he might just as easily be talking about any number of jaded Famous Writers at graduate creative writing programs who believe that—in Hans Ostrom’s words—“pedagogy is not considered important enough to conceptualize—to bother with intellectually” (1994, xii). Yet by remaining ignorant of other ways of teaching and adhering to a single method of instruction—close reading of student texts—these workshop-oriented teachers miss out on the opportunity to reach *all* their students. To give just one

example, researchers have found that while the workshop method may work well with visual and auditory learners, kinesthetic learners—those whose cognitive functions are best triggered by *doing*—are not well served by simply sitting around in a large circle for anywhere from one to three hours.

Moreover, while this hierarchic model may have functioned effectively centuries ago in class-bound, aristocratic Europe, it is problematic in the democratic and multicultural twenty-first century. One obvious inconvenience is that the master-apprentice system tends to reproduce an image of “genius” held by those in power. Unconsciously or not, masters seek apprentices who are like themselves. In fact, the master’s function might be said chiefly to cull out those who do not possess genius. Pedagogy through this lens is survival of the fittest. Those who can’t be trained to think and write in the accepted patterns are ultimately rejected. Radical (or critical or liberatory or emancipatory) pedagogy rejects this exclusionist principle and seeks to better the lot of the many rather than just to validate the elite few. Teachers committed to a radical pedagogy address “urgent social problems rooted in race and gender inequality and cultural conflict. . . . [They have] an ambitious aim in enlightening students to recognize the silence of oppression and to reinforce empowerment of individual voices” (Flores 2004).

Liberatory pedagogy, championed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in his book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), opposes the “banking” model of education, in which teachers “deposit” knowledge in their students, who are like banks receiving money. At the end of the term, students simply return this knowledge—in the form of essays or exams—with occasionally a small amount of interest into the bargain. Freire detested this relationship because teachers have all the power. Students are discouraged from questioning the information they are given; instead, they regurgitate it (to shift the metaphor) without much thought, and are purged, no longer having anything to do with the knowledge that might have transformed them. With the goal of encouraging radical social change, Freire argued for a method of teaching that would force those being taught to be aware of and, more importantly, critique what they were taught. He believed that this process would allow the powerless to become agents of social change: “the oppressors, who oppress, exploit and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to

free both” (26). The Freireian pedagogy led to a change across the entire educational curriculum, but it was especially powerful in English studies. At many institutions of higher learning, a new emphasis on teaching work by writers from historically oppressed groups was matched by an equally aggressive push to hire these writers as classroom teachers. Many established teachers found themselves examining their own prejudice, exposing, as bell hooks says, “the covert conservative political underpinnings shaping the content of material in the classroom, as well as the ways in which ideologies of domination informed the ways thinkers teach and act in the classroom” (2003, 1).

Bishop herself acutely felt this sense of disempowerment in her own graduate education: “To begin with, there was not enough room in the world for great poets of the first rank. Competition was necessarily fierce for the few places in the pantheon for women who were writers (writers who were women?). It was understood: If you make it, you’re a poet; if you fail, you’re a woman poet” (Bishop and Ostrum 1994, 282). The essentially patriarchal nature of the master-apprentice model led many women creative writers to look for different roles for themselves and alternative methods of teaching their students. Feminist theory incorporates “diverse and sometimes contradictory discursive practices” while still emphasizing “the importance of women’s individual and shared experience and their political struggle in the world” (Treichler 1986, 99). In order to harness—rather than to ignore—these contradictory practices, many feminist theorists turned to a hybrid scholarship of teaching, one that, as Jan Zlotnik Schmidt notes, urges “the intertwining of the private and the public; the autobiographical and the theoretical” (1998, 2). Nancy Miller calls this “personal criticism”—“an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism” (1991, 2). Bishop writes in *Teaching Lives*: “If we accept the job description of writing teacher, then theory and practice, the public and the personal, must form a web, a network, a circle, an interconnected chain, a dialogue, a mutual refrain in our teaching, a tapestry, quilt or momentarily well-constructed whole” (1997, 320). Katherine Haake similarly believes that critical theory by feminist creative writers should be “braided,” “multidiscursive,” “narrative,” “self-conscious,” “ironic,” and “oblique” (2000, 15).

In Haake’s classes, theory plays as important a role as the students’ own writing. Students repeatedly examine their work through the lens of critical theory. They begin to question and resist assumptions that they have long taken for granted. Indeed, Haake’s students learn that the logo- and

phallogocentric power structure may be just as dominant in supposedly “liberal” creative writing classrooms as it is elsewhere in American society. Haake writes:

Having no theory is a dangerous theory because it reinscribes the structures we can't see that nonetheless contain us.

And as always, much of the power of ideology is that it is invisible.

Theory helps make the invisible visible. Creative writers need it, even if it gives them hives. (2000, 240)

As Vincent Leitch observes, out of such thinking “comes a certain strategic stance and practice for pedagogy. Nothing is ordained, natural, unalterable, monumental. Everything is susceptible to critique and transformation” (1986, 53).

Eve Shelnutt, while not as deeply invested in poststructuralist critical theory, runs a creative writing course with no workshops at all. Instead, students spend their time developing an extensive vocabulary that they use to talk about model stories by professional writers. Shelnutt claims that “students certainly need to be conversant with [critical theory's] major themes and be able to accept that it's out there. . . . to ignore and be disdainful and aggressive against those theories is akin to acting as if abstract painting had never existed, or as if we had not music prior to Schoenberg. We would never in music or art take the positions we as writers take against critical theory” (1994, 200).

If creative writing pedagogy has so obviously benefited from critical theory and composition studies, surely it must be a growing academic field. After all, there are so many questions to answer: What is the role of the audience in the composition of a work of literature? Do writers create work primarily for their own satisfaction or to win the approval of their readers? To what extent are authorial voices a fiction? To what degree should creative writers foreground their political passions? their class? gender? sexual orientation? theoretical biases? And on and on. Unfortunately, in most creative writing programs, answering these questions is deemed far less important than honing a writer's publications skills.

Kristen Nichols explains the lack of emphasis on pedagogy this way: “First and foremost, the goal of [a graduate creative writing program] is to educate and equip writers, not teachers.” She notes also that “writers who teach in MFA programs often aren't well-versed as teachers themselves. They don't have to be because they are surrounded by students who are also aspiring writers and who are capable of creating and

participating in an effective classroom discussion without very much guidance from a teacher” (2004, 14). As a result, creative writing pedagogy currently remains a small and relatively unvisited academic backwater. Other than in very rare instances—such as the Certificate in Teaching Creative Writing offered by Antioch University in Los Angeles—most institutions of higher learning do not offer graduate instruction in creative writing pedagogy. In the absence of such courses, motivated graduate students who want to teach are generally left to their own devices to cobble together a theory of how students learn and how teachers ought to teach. Those who work as teaching assistants in university composition courses will pick up some rhetorical theory in their required classes. Those enrolled in literary theory classes will learn a little more. But they will be swimming upstream.

Nevertheless, despite continued resistance to and distrust of pedagogy, there is hope. The many emerging creative writers with a passion for teaching may, pragmatically, keep their focus on their writing. Yet they are likely, also, to have more interest in pedagogy than their precursors, to agree with bell hooks that “the classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility”: “In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom” (1994, 207).