CREATIVITY DEVELOPMENT & THE WRITING WORKSHOP

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ABSTRACT

For a long time now, higher education learners have been flocking to join the English Literature and Creative writing programmes in various parts of the world, intending to become writers. Trying to match up with their enthusiastic pace, a vast majority of institutes today have come to the forefront to offer Creative Writing Courses, most of them offering the workshop as a part of that course. The academic teaching of creative writing is therefore no longer given an alienated status. With the pedagogical mechanism of developing creativity in students contextualized with immense response, numerous academics have grasped the importance of an underlying standard which informs their teaching of creative writing skills to learners. At the same time, as Donovan (2008) and Haven (1999) inform us, we are also surrounded today by a varied body of practitioners whose views on creative writing pedagogy are informed by their input on 'creativity' as an art form, particular to their own writing practice or teaching experiences, thereby providing the arena with its unique set of contradictory approaches to developing and enhancing students' creative writing skills. With the aforementioned information as background, the present article will seek to address the underlying principle behind an endorsed establishment of creative writing as an academic discipline, especially in the context of the higher education sector, as postulated by various practitioners in the field. The same will then be followed by reasons that foster the workshop process as an ideal method to foster creativity among students, a few issues that may nevertheless arise during the process, and how by utilizing a cautionary mechanism the discontents could be successfully avoided and transformed into a successful workshop.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between creative writing practices and balancing it with a proper pedagogical approach has been a vibrant research area for some years now(Sheppard & Thurston, 2002-2003). And with this strong increase in writing courses, there has

been some deal of research into what more writers have to offer in the pedagogical process, or how the experience of taking part in creative writing might influence teachers' pedagogy.

The rationale behind creative writing pedagogy, according to Mayers (2009), for instance, is to introduce changes in the perceived view of the function of creative writing as an academic enterprise, or to bring about transmuted notions of the intentions underlying the existence of creative writing programs and courses. He believes that the basic purpose of creative writing courses and programs, or creative writing studies on the whole, is not just to produce writers, but to promote the 'general intellectual framework concerning literacy itself.' By expanding the canvas of creative writing from practice based to practice led, from practice alone to practice, and theories incorporating diverse and 'practical knowledge of (and facility with) the composition of fiction, poetry, and other so-called creative genres,' and back to practice, creative writing programs strive to 'fashion themselves as producers of academic professionals, scholars or writers who are capable of teaching not only creative writing but also composition, literature, and theory, depending on their ancillary areas of expertise and interest'.

The basic objective of any creative writing programme, claims Haake (2000), should be to further learning experience, and ascertain the provision of reading material, and construction of an adequate instruction framework in such a manner within which students can define the controlling factors and leading skills that will sustain their writing practice throughout their lives. However, as Andrew Motion suggests, any good creative writing course may not necessarily aim to discover ways of 'establishing worldly success' (Motion, 2001, p.x). Bell likewise reflects on the presence of numerous students who may take up such a course of training not with the intention of pursuing a creative or publishing career in the field as much as with that of adding something novel, important and pleasurable to their 'repertoire of life skills' (Bell, 2001, p.xi). It is in this respect that Gureghian (2010) recommends how important it is for especially the novice writing students to discover a place where they can discover their talent and sharpen

their craft. Ideally, there is no better a starting point 'to hone and nurture writing than a creative writing workshop (2010:121) as is also explained below.

THE WORKSHOP AS A SIGNATURE APPROACH TO TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING

The term 'workshop,' endorses Harper (2010), has long been associated with the concepts of productivity and manufacturing, especially of a holistic kind. It has also been used to imply forging something, as per the word's etymological connotation in the French language; and taken to represent the English term 'homework', i.e. 'the work done at home.' However, perhaps more acutely, the term points to a phenomenon, 'something,' which has to be worked upon to generate something else, a product, that could be 'valued.' The only question he asks is 'what it is that we value in and about the workshops, and for what reasons?' (Harper, 2010:xvii).

James (2009) sees the workshop as a perfect opportunity for writers to come across their audience on a one on one interactive basis, and discover their readers' reactions to their work. By isolating problems and offering solutions, these 'reactions and suggestions' of peers can be a valuable asset in developing further skills of workshop participants (Stern, 1991:250).At the same time, the participant-writer also has the 'benefit' of being exposed to 'the actual experience of bringing texts into being,' as against finding out about the same from another critic's point of view (Monteith & Miles, 1992:4; cited in James, 2009:52). This is coupled with an added advantage for students on two levels: first, they get an opportunity to develop and produce their own creative piece of work, and measure it against the existing work; second, the whole process 'further contributes to formation of more theory which can be used in the production of more texts' James, 2009:52).

Workshops are also viewed as a valuable context in terms of expertise; a place to hone especially the inexperienced writer's confidence, with the help of a facilitative writer-teacher 'to guide students through the process' (Anderson, 2007). As Anderson elaborates, a writing workshop is a place where learners work on

two fronts: not only do they learn about the basics of 'plot, structure, character, voice, dialog, description, and point of view,' but also how to write, and to observe in what way their work is acceptable to the peers. With its iterative working process, based on 'frequent feedback loops' and immediate evaluation of work, the workshop provides participants 'a structure' wherein they can 'maintain the discipline' of continuing to work on their draft (Wickersham, 2007). By reading the work out loud and by criticizing it, participants 'learn to eliminate what doesn't work' and 'become ruthless in editing out the inessential and the irrelevant and write tighter, better prose as a result' (*Ibid*). Hernandez (2007) likewise perceives the workshop as a means to accumulate experience and to discover how good one's writing aptitude actually is. By exerting oneself to the continuous task of composition and re-composition, a writer discovers more about his/her frame of mind, and capabilities, which increases productivity as well. 'Practice is essential to developing the over-all skill' (Hernandez, 2007), and 'learning various alternative ways to improve the writing pattern' (Harves, 2012).

Russell Celyn supports the workshop as a process wherein the inexperienced writer can get into shape by refining his/her writing along with help of a writer-teacher, who nurtures an atmosphere of experiment; 'the aim is to understand through practice the mechanisms of fiction' (Jones, 2001:246). It's a 'training ground' where one comes into contact with a 'diverse readership', and acquires practical expertise coupled with confidence, by detaching oneself from one's work and observing at a safe distance how pushing beyond one's writing limit can be productive (Magrs, 2001:316). By providing students with tools through which they can begin to create a piece of imaginative writing, and by encouraging students to investigate various issues associated with the process of writing a text (such as the nature of character, narrative, point of view, landscape, etc.) through the production of their own piece of writing would build-up their faith in their critical abilities, and make them more coherent, more expressive, more malleable and more engaged with their texts (Burroway, 2003).

A unique stance on the art of teaching and the acquisition of creative writing skills and practices is adopted by Gureghian (2010), who opines a serious need for writers, teachers and students alike to become aware of the varied mind-sets of their diverse audience. He asserts that learning about their audience is 'extremely beneficial to the student writer, and "writing what they know,' especially in the beginning stages. However, it is up to the teacher to help them discover that' and one of the most convenient of ways to achieve that is through the workshop method (Gureghian, 2010:121). Leahy (2010) likewise supports the 'audience' factor of the workshop, which has made it one of the principal methods of instruction in the creative writing pedagogy. When compared to various other modes of teaching, such as the rather direct class-room teaching, she observes how the workshop students get an opportunity to come across an actual audience rather than having the teacher as an only 'audience that students' writing ever has, or at least the only audience that seems to matter'. Additionally, since an important element of vitality in a writing workshop is its double nature as a place of instruction and a process of interactive discovery (Cook, 2001:302), this is something which is hardly possible in a classroom setting. Yet, at the same time, it may be somewhat detrimental to assume that a workshop based setting would be completely advantageous to the purposes discussed thus far, since there are some possible drawbacks to the mechanism involved that must be taken into account before moving on with the process.

THE WORKSHOP AND ITS DISCONTENTS
During their course of training in a creative writing workshop, theory and research points out how creative writer-participants at times lose their creative potential in the absence of what they believe to be a 'supportive environment' (Cole *et.al.,* 1999:3). Although the workshop based approach is an established technique in creative writing pedagogy, there are some drawbacks pointed out against it in Bell & Magrs (2001), the same being supported by other researchers as well.

A) Submitting or Putting op One's Work for Criticism May Place the Writer at an Awkward Position

Stern (1991) claims fiction or creative writing workshops are intentionally structured to give writers an opportunity to test their mettle in terms of craft in front of a test audience. An atmosphere is established where they are supposed to 'critique each other's work', and get feedback from the person who is organizing the workshop, from his or her own perspective (Burstein, 1995; Stern, 1991:250). This workshop atmosphere centered around practical criticism of creative works can be a rather dreadful experience, especially on two fronts:

Listening to criticism levied on participant's own writing efforts;
Offering criticism on another's writing (Aczel, 2001).

Due to the sensitive nature of many a writers, 'many first time participants in writing workshops clam up, or even stop writing altogether' when faced with tutorial or participant criticism of their works (Aczel, 2001:311). James (2009) asserts that participants in a workshop at times feel uncomfortable when asked to give their critical feedback on their peers' works, or those at other published authors as well. The primary reason behind their lack of active practical participation is due to their feeling of insecurity, lack of expertise, and fear at how they'll be looked upon by their fellow participants and the course instructor (James, 2009). Others choose to remain silent not out of shyness or because they can't contribute practical feedback at the level required, but out of their desire to appear somewhat 'enigmatic, talented or brilliant;' the know-it-all who choose not to say a word (Magrs, 2001:319).

B) Discussion May Not Always Be Gentle, Pragmatic Or Encouraging

Sometimes, instead of creating a collaborative atmosphere, it is quite possible that the workshop may end up begetting students prone to becoming 'defensive of their work' (James, 2009:54). Some participants actually get 'annoyed' and 'possessive' about how other writers in the group take their intended storylines 'in

directions quite different from their own' (Aczel, 2001:313). In an even more hostile workshop, certain 'participants become obstructed by their personal reactions, since they 'aren't open to different ways of telling a story and insist that there is one right way' (Stern, 1991:250). Stern warns against participating in especially such groups where the criticism is ferocious and 'dogmatic', not created with the best of intentions, but to discourage other writers, since it can be really dangerous for especially a novice writer.

C) In Light of Assessment and Group Criticism, Some Students May Become More Assertive Than Others; Some May Feel Inferior and Disinterested in Creative Composition Process or Activities

At times, some of the participants of the workshop are so well read that they are consumed by a negative feeling springing from their inability to find a proper match (be it in terms of reading material, course instructor, or fellow participants) in the whole set up. This may further lead them to gain an assertive demean our (Stern, 1991). On other occasions workshop associations can become maliciously destructive especially when almost every other participant tries to outdo the other, trying to 'convince the other members that they are incapable of writing fiction at all' (*Ibid*). What will hardly come off as a shock to many instructors is when especially the novice participants in a writing workshop display a lack of active endeavours once their work has been subjected to criticism, even if the criticism happens to be 'to the point, constructed and carefully delivered' (Aczel, 2001:311). Aczel believes this to be the most dreadful of all drawbacks.

D) Some Members of the Group May Not be Sympathetic to Others' Type of Writing and May Push Them Further Away From Their Original Intentions
E)

Stern (1991:251-252) says workshops have a dual chance of turning either into 'mutual admiration circles' or 'mutual destructive circles', thereby turning the writers away from their intent to write. In case of the former, every participant assures the

other about their commendable efforts, with almost no criticism at all, aiming to encourage the writers and allow them to develop in their own pace (Stern, 1991:251). Either this, or they are hardly well read, and therefore unaware of the 'fresh, innovative and honest fiction', as against the 'sentimental, clichéd, and contriving' kind, which captures their attention due to their inexperience. Such type of forced reverence sends writers into disbelief once they are targeted with criticism or rejection outside the workshop. On the other hand Stern (1991) informs us about the latter category of workshops where some participants are no less than 'bullies', violent in their attack of works without any logical need. Both formats of work shopping produce 'misguided criticism' which can lead to 'jettisoning of a perfectly good idea' (Aczel, 2001:312).

Due to reasons such as these, and more, Katherine Cole worries that instead of fostering vigorous creativity, traditional work shopping techniques may end up displacing the writer from his active participation zone, steering students away from elements that may 'result in genius' (Coles, 2006:11; cited in Wilson, 2010:208). Coles further warns us of the possible danger of having the workshop lead to 'a uniformity of text' wherein storylines become 'boringly formulaic' which ultimately leads to 'the dearth of good literature' by restraining 'interesting texts from shinning out' (Coles, 2006:8; in James, 2009:57).

STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME POSSIBLE HURDLES DURING WORKSHOPPING

James (2009:54) maintains that in spite of fostering training expertise and proactive measures taken to ensure creative success, a writing workshop may 'occasionally' backfire giving rise to manifold drawbacks. Aczel (2001:313) suggests the natural aura of workshop misunderstandings that are bound to spring out due to the varying voices participants share in the set-up, each of whom 'see' and 'hear' words differently. Yet, despite the numerous concerns, creative writing practitioners, students and teachers alike, continue asserting that in the context of creative writing pedagogy, every single effort within the workshop is worth the risks, and that ultimately it is this one medium of instruction that can foster creativity unlike any other teaching strategy (Donnelly,

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2010; Stern, 1991; Vanderslice, 2010b). What Mahar (2001) suggests is for instructors to go beyond the possible drawbacks, and create an atmosphere that is 'supportive,' 'furthers a degree of 'commitment,' ensures 'easy networking,' and a good sense among divergent 'egos in a single room' leading them to want to 'improve their craft'. And the only way the same could be achieved is if the workshop establishes 'a set of rules and a shared vocabulary' negotiated between the instructors and the students at the very outset (Magrs, 2001:317).

In this situation, it is in the best interest of students to 'train' them about the possible pitfalls they may come into contact with during the process, and consequently draw their attention to how they could veer away from them (James, 2009:54). 'Ideas' engendered between participants and creative writing facilitators in this regard might include the following aspects:

- How compulsory participation should be
- How participation is defined - can it mean just sitting and listening?
- Commitment to the process
- How work might be shared
- How comments are never personal
- The logistics of sharing work

James (2009:54) points out the usefulness of having a 'list' such as the above. Additionally, she recommends all instructors to use the list to have their students recall the opted set of negotiations and what they had chosen to intentionally pursue, once they feel the workshop to have deviated from the norms of ethics. This is perhaps one of the most effective of tactics through which 'we can teach students' the way to establishing 'constructive feedback' and 'how to receive and react to that feedback,' in the classroom, or during the workshop (James, 2009:50). conclusively, the same could also be understood in terms of a set of crucial principles from Michaelsen et al. (2002), which Mac (2011) suggests should be applied to creative teaching courses. Simply put:

…..Participants must be made accountable for their actions. Without accountability for their behavior in their groups, they haveno motivation to actually do the work necessary for a healthy workshop – bring sufficient copies of the text that they've written, read the others' texts, and participate fully in the in-class workshop.

Mac (2011) supports these obligations by Michaelsen et al. (2002), and considers this 'individual pre-class preparation' vital as it will promote a positive contribution by participants '… to their team, [and] high quality team performance' as well (Mac, 2011:226).

CONCLUSION

Dealing with numerous contemporary issues, queries, predicaments and ideas concerning the establishment of creative writing as an academic field, especially in the context of the university sector, and its current position within the higher education, many scholar of the field postulate creative writing as a practice-led and process-based discipline; a discipline which encompasses manifold insinuations and inferences regarding its nature, practice, pedagogy and theory. At the same time it's a discipline that harnesses a pedagogical mechanism with practice, one that is mainly driven by workshop-based practice.

For creative writing pedagogy in the context of a developing nation such as Pakistan, significant constrictions obstruct instructors' efforts to developing 'creative writing skills' of learners in the classroom environment. The factors include 'large-size classes, lack of resources, untrained teachers, fixed syllabus, forty minutes duration for English and external examination bodies, apart from 'curriculum and assessment. Also, lack of teacher autonomy, which renders it impossible for them to foster spontaneous and uninhibited creativity, or to teach anything else for that matter, without seeking permission from the authorities first. This situation, coupled with the necessary compulsion to follow an inflexible curriculum and fixed assessment protocol which does not give opportunity to teachers to act independently has been found to diminish the creative writing instructors

creativity, inside the classroom environment, and their students creative potential as well.

Due to reasons similar to the above, courses seeking to nurture creative writing skills of learners make workshopping 'the heart of their pedagogy' (Donnelly, 2010). Therefore, in terms of the pedagogical practice, despite coming across numerous 'missteps and failure' in any arena of learning, much research points to the majority of writing instructors and students alike being likely susceptible to come across one singular notion: 'workshops foster creativity' (Leahy, 2010:64).

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