Where Are We Going Next? A Conversation about Creative Writing Pedagogy (Pt. 2)

By Cathy Day, Anna Leahy and Stephanie Vanderslice

*Editor's Note: Part II of a conversation between creative writing teachers Cathy Day, Anna Leahy and Stephanie Vanderslice. Please **click here** to read Part I, including an introduction to the entire piece in which the writers lay out their questions about the methods, practice and changes emerging in the new creative writing classroom.*

Conversation, continued

Stephanie Vanderslice: *Rubric* has become a distasteful word, hasn't it? Rubrics might work in program assessment, but narrative response is much more effective for individual evaluation. We shouldn't lean too much on rubrics in creative writing (music to many readers' ears!), in part because they can be overly fault-finding, which doesn't help writers at any level. The writers who are doing well don't really find out why and even what they, individually, could be doing better, and the writers who are having problems don't get those individual problems addressed.

I'm becoming very interested in different types of response and how they help writers advance. This is especially important because I teach undergraduates for the most part right now, and response needs to be very formative at this stage. As opposed to summative response, which is the grade the student gets at the end of a unit or semester that gauges the student's mastery of a skill or discipline, formative response is the actual feedback that helps the student to improve over time. In teaching creative writing, my thoughtful oral and written response to student work is much more important to their growth than the grade I record or the boxes I check on a rubric.

But I'm noticing anecdotal differences in how students receive the response styles of the different teachers in our creative writing program, and that's really something worth investigating: how students receive response and whether and how they implement it to improve their work. The sooner students learn how to use feedback well, the better for their work and their development as writers.

Anna Leahy: I find it crucial to distinguish *assessment*, a term I use to refer to program appraisal, and *evaluation*, which describes grading student work. And formative response is yet another distinct activity. The British seem to use *assessment* to describe all of it, but we shouldn't conflate a curricular program with individual student writing.

When we respond to student writing, we must strive to be neither a Bobby Knight (Mary Swander dismantles that approach in *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom*[15]) nor a Pollyanna. Both extremes involve, to too great an extent or too directly, self-esteem. As I've written elsewhere, echoing John Gardner and Wallace Stegner, the self is always already part of the writing process, but can and, I think, should be mostly beside the point in workshop exchanges. That's not easy, though.

Colleagues who've observed my classes have been surprised that students energetically discuss weaknesses. Narrative feedback—written or oral—can open conversation and potential. Because the real challenge in my courses is the revision I require, talking about weaknesses or obstacles becomes a mutual leg-up—motivation—students give each other to face that challenge. Students learn not to be afraid of making mistakes generally; they become more comfortable being shown shortcomings so they can work on them. Playing to our strengths isn't bad, but cognitive scientists assert that we learn from mistakes even better. That's a good habit of mind for students to carry beyond earning their degrees.

Cathy Day: We do need to consider what our students will do after graduation, and what experiences will help them succeed later. One area in which we might look to composition studies is digital media writing, but creative writing programs seem slower to do so than our colleagues down the hall teaching composition. Why is that? Over the last few years, my students' work has become increasingly multimodal. They tell stories with pictures and graphic novel frames and drawings and links to YouTube videos. They tell audio stories and video stories that ask us to read in a different way.

Rather than prohibit this hybridity, I've challenged myself to catch up, to understand and utilize new modes of expression—in the classroom and in my own writing. Many schools offer composition courses in digital writing (narrative via blog, podcast, video, and website). I've been closely following what's happening at Stanford's undergraduate creative writing program, where creative writers Adam Johnson and Tom Kealey teach a new media writing course titled "Storytelling Through Any Means Necessary." A considerable generational divide exists between those comfortable and conversant in old media vs. new media, and I'm interested in trying to bridge that gap somehow by creating a textbook (Burroway 2.0?) or a conference (Breadloaf 2.0?). Actually, this is a big reason why I accepted a new position at a school dedicated to emerging media initiatives.

Anna Leahy: I'm dabbling in digital media when I can, but not yet confidant enough in my skills to bring it into the classroom much. At a basic level, while I use PowerPoint only occasionally, I'd like to see whether the nonlinear Prezi could be useful for mini-lectures, to generate discussion, or to allow students to document the writing process. Or now that I blog, I'm thinking about how a private class blog might work.

Recent discussions in popular venues and books like Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows*[16] make me leery of embracing digital projects part and parcel right now. Some initial studies in brain science indicate that digital modes may be at odds with some habits of mind—curiosity, concentration— I'm working to cultivate. It's not that I'm against digital modes, but until I understand them better, I don't want to inadvertently introduce contradictions into my pedagogy.

Stephanie Vanderslice: Digital media is something I've only begun to incorporate in my creative writing courses. I'm learning about it through my National Writing Project (NWP)[17] work. The NWP has really embraced digital media and web 2.0 in teaching writing; in fact, they have a term for this aspect of their organization, "Digital Is"—as in, digital just *is* in the 21st century and we need to get used to it.

It was reading the book *Teaching the New Writing*[18], co-published by Teacher's College Press and the NWP, that I came to understand that it's absolutely essential that we catch up and understand that multimodal composition needs to be incorporated into courses at every level— not only because students must know these skills in order to communicate in the 21st century, but because they are already using them outside the classroom. Since reading this groundbreaking book, I've made changes to all my courses to include some kind of digital component. For example, I have always required my introductory creative writing students to read a book on the writing life (from a list I provide) and present it to the class. Now, these presentations must be digital. In my creative writing pedagogy course, students must write a literacy autobiography; now I require that these be digital stories or digital literacy autobiographies. In moving toward this component, I have learned that there is actually an online archive of digital literacy autobiographies. Not surprisingly, most students are remarkably enthusiastic about these components and often have a greater facility with the technology than I do. I might give them suggestions, like Prezi, Glogster, or Microsoft's Digital Storyteller, to get them started, but they usually find on their own the technology suited to the story they want to tell.
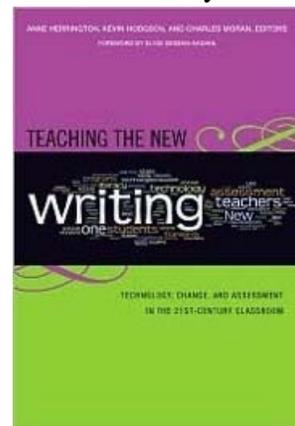
This issue seems to present itself urgently as the next frontier in creative writing pedagogy. How and why do we assign it? How do we assess it in terms of creative writing? A lot of programs are quite far along in this endeavor; in fact, Virginia Tech requires a digital story in a student's exit

portfolio. We need to start experimenting with the workshop model to accommodate digital modes and writing about it.

Anna Leahy: Based on my own experience and on anecdotes from librarians, students have a surface-level, casual understanding of the technology they use. That's a reason to bring technology into the classroom: to help students think critically and creatively about technology they're already using.

Digital modes are not a replacement for what we're already teaching, though. Instead, they offer new, additional — often nonlinear — ways to tell stories, use imagery, and think creatively. Chapman University's digital humanities guru showed faculty some spectacular projects, including the journal *Vectors*[19] — you have to see it to understand its scope. The potential is huge, but these projects raise concerns: Higher education struggles to embrace, support, and "count" collaborative work. We cling to traditional relationships between form and content, and haven't learned how to read or value content in innovative forms without worrying that we're merely being dazzled. We resist valuing archival work, even when a digital archive offers new ways to ask critical questions. Importantly, going digital requires time and money— that's my biggest obstacle: time.

Cathy Day: Lately, even putting digital modes aside, I've been going through a bit of a paradigm shift anyway and asking myself a lot of hard questions about teaching fiction and the efficacy of the workshop model for different traditional modes. Why do we call a class "Fiction Workshop," if it's really "Short Story Workshop"? Does the workshop model privilege the short story over the novel because it's a more manageable form, akin to the paper? Can we tinker with the workshop model to accommodate "big things" as well as short stories?

Perhaps I'm asking these questions because I've just finished a five-year stint teaching in an MFA program. Most of my students arrived in my classes already craft proficient, ready to embark on larger projects. A thesis, a book, a big thing. The budding novelists told me they considered workshop courses a hindrance. They try to workshop novels-in-progress and submit early chapters, and then are required to revise and resubmit, which they do, over and over again, sometimes never moving forward. Others said they "go through the motions" by writing short stories about which they don't particularly care, in order to fulfill their workshop requirement, while working privately on their novels, only sharing their real project with their thesis advisor and perhaps a few trusted readers. What is the point of pursuing creative writing instruction if that instruction gets in the way of writing the book you've always wanted to write?

Anna Leahy: We must consider how labels and goals shape course structure, in-class activities, and students' learning. Also, the semester timeframe and class meeting schedule are arbitrary constraints imposed upon us. It's challenging to figure out how the workshop model can be adapted for different course topics and

levels, as well as for these timeframe configurations. How, for instance, might a novel workshop function more like the writing group that many published novelists have? At least one of my fiction colleagues requires little, if any, revision; his course is about production.

Cathy Day: I'm trying some new methods in graduate and advanced undergraduate workshops, organizing them more like group independent studies. I ask my students to write up an independent study proposal and share it with the entire class on what I call a "process blog," which they maintain throughout the semester. I've also stopped asking for stand-alone stories. Now, I ask for pages. When we ask for stories, not pages, our students respond as if they are writing a paper, trying to meet page requirements and page limits—swelling very small stories, shrinking very big stories—rather than working to find the right and appropriate form for the particular story they're trying to tell. Sometimes, I'll require a 50-page manuscript as the final project, which can be the beginning of a novel, a novella, a few connected stories, a few unconnected stories, fifty one-page stories, etc. They only have to workshop 20+ of those pages, but they must present it to us like a book manuscript: cover page with title and contact information, table of contents, epigraph, even maps and photographs, if they wish.
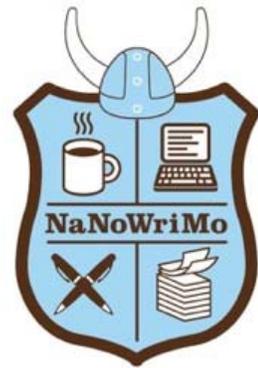
And this fall, I'm going to try something new: whole class participation in National Novel Writing Month[20]. They'll write 50,000 words during the month of November, but revise just 25 pages for their final grade. I guess you could say that my current pedagogical stance is about figuring out how to teach my students that writing isn't just something they do for school, but is a way of life. For a long time, I just taught craft, which is what most of us do, I think. Now, I'm also interested in showing them how to create a literary life for themselves, if that's what they want.

Stephanie Vanderslice: It's wonderful that you're doing that National Novel Month project. More and more programs seem to be getting involved in NaNoWriMo, and having participated in it myself and having seen even my undergraduate students getting involved on their own, I see the value of what NaNoWriMo communicates: getting pages drafted is an important part of the daily writing life. That project also communicates the value of process, of exploring and writing those pages, even though some of them might not ever see the light of day. But they're all part of becoming the writer you want to be, rather than fussing over an individual story or poem to make it perfect. Both approaches are needed in the creative writing classroom, but we often don't have enough of the former: the process, the messy part.

Cathy Day: Because process is hard to grade.

Anna Leahy: Poetry workshops are often structured as one-poem-at-a-time because a collection of disparate poems can get published. I've sensed a trend toward the cohesive collection, though, and I'm interested in sequences in my own writing. When I was an MFA student, Stanley Plumly launched a workshop with John Keats's odes defined as a series. John Tribble, editor of *Crab Orchard Review*, hosted an AWP panel focusing on coherent collections. Beth Ann Fennelly has written about "the winnowing of wildness"—or lack of disparateness—in first books.

In this wake, I developed a graduate course with a chapbook as the final project. *Ordering the Storm*[21] was a great resource; we also read several chapbooks. What students appreciated most—and which I expected them to appreciate least—was the requirement to submit a formal proposal. They could revise proposals, so no one was stuck with a project that changed as they drafted and revised. Students were motivated by having articulated a big thing up front. The course had a different kind of energy.
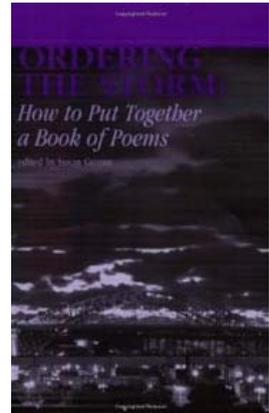
On the other hand, maybe such a course overemphasizes professionalization and the goal of publication, when I want students to take risks and attend to language and form in each poem.

Cathy Day: You're absolutely right. My graduate students were extremely professionally motivated, and I'm sure I was responding somewhat to their anxieties—helping them get their books ready for agents and editors.

Stephanie Vanderslice: Programs like the one at UNC-Wilmington recognize that, for better or for worse, the market is heavily focused on longer works and thus several courses there help students to create longer pieces in innovative ways. In addition to several courses that address varying approaches to writing the novel, they also offer a course in documentary poetry that focuses on collections and a course focused on "award winning first collections," which serves the additional purpose of helping students become aware of the first book awards out there. Finally, they have an introductory and advanced courses in book design that, while more focused on the publishing industry, give budding authors a sense of the *process* of book publishing. Curricula like these demonstrate there's room in the curriculum for both kinds of courses, those that focus on longer works and those that focus on stories, essays, or poems, as well as those that focus on exploration and invention.

Anna Leahy: When we discuss these issues, we need to keep teasing out the differences between MFA and BFA or BA curricula. Because of the risk of professionalization or narrowing, I wouldn't structure an undergraduate course around a chapbook project, though a series or sectioned poem might fit an advanced undergraduate course. We can't accomplish everything in every workshop, and I want my undergraduates to experiment and try things just to see what happens, not merely find a single voice or style that works.

I wonder whether the mistaken (or outdated) concept of a monolithic workshop and, as Donald Hall called it, McPoem, exist because we haven't articulated enough of what we actually do in different courses. In May, *Inside Higher Ed* ran a piece about an innovative approach to teaching by a Duke University English professor that "attracted attention nationwide."[22] The course was structured around contracts, standards, peer response, and revision—all pedagogical elements long used in creative writing. Cathy Davidson said that the experience exceeded her expectations and that "students took more risks,"[23] participated, and pushed each other to improve. She admits that she "worked like a dog,"[24] commenting right along with her students on every blog post that was a short essay on the week's topic. Good for her, but I'm flummoxed as to why creative writing teachers aren't lauded daily, since this stuff is old hat to us.

Oddly, one measure of the approach's success was that Davidson expected every student to earn an A (15 of 16 already had when the article was posted), because students revised work that didn't meet the standards. In some ways, I'd dealt with the so-called easy A in *Can It Really Be Taught*[25]? For Davidson, there were no cries of grade inflation, but rather an acceptance that students rose to the course's rigorous challenges.

Stephanie Vanderslice: That story does sound familiar. An overwhelming theme of *Does the Writing Workshop Work?* is that undergraduate workshops really benefit from a combined approach that introduces students to peer review but also introduces them to the various forms of invention. My students and I do a significant amount of in-class writing, especially exercises around a concept I'm trying to teach, like rhythm or structure. For example, we might work individually on pieces (and they can be in any genre) that must all incorporate the same line a certain number of times. It's worth remembering, too, that, as they come to us with different backgrounds in writing, sometimes even advanced students could do with a little instruction in invention and recursive revision before they develop the assumptions that lead to writers block—i.e. good writers don't need self-assignments, their work is always the result of divine inspiration or the dictation of the muses.

Anna Leahy: More than a little instruction, I'd say. Larissa Szporluk and I have a conversation essay in the recent *Mid-American Review* about imitation, invention, and deep imagination.[26] Revision is an important aspect of my approach as a teacher, which scares students at first, but almost always ends up making them

proud of their work—and interested in others'.

Stephanie Vanderslice: Actually, that essay is a great example for new writers of the all the ways in which a piece of work is born, via a combination of practices and habits of mind. Most illuminating for students are the many ways in which juxtaposition—of inspiration, forms, ideas, subjects and on and on—almost always leads to interesting new work.

Cathy Day: Something else I'd love to see grow or be added to our curriculum and/or co-curriculum is an emphasis on what Dinty W. Moore calls *literary citizenship*[27]. Many programs require creative writing majors to take a course that's akin to service learning: tutoring young writers, administering a visiting writers' series, partnering with community organizations, etc. According to AWP, there are more than 800 degree-granting creative writing programs in this country—an amazing number!—so it's important to think about how we, as writers and teachers of creative writing in those hundreds of programs, can channel all that interest constructively. Creative writing programs, in their current manifestation, are conceived of as laboratories in which writers are cultivated, but I like to think that we're also cultivating future readers and teachers and editors and bloggers and book reviewers and book buyers—citizens in the vast literary culture. I've been trying to be more conscious of this role we have as creative writing teachers, but I'm sort of making it up as I go along.

Anna Leahy: I've been using the term *nerd* to refer to the habits of mind that I want to cultivate in my students, because I want them to be curious, to think divergently, and to try new things. I want them to be creative thinkers generally.

Literary citizen may be a more discipline-specific term, but broader, too, in the sense of connecting with the larger community and culture. Isolation, because it's required to do the writing itself, can all too easily be viewed as the most important part of the endeavor. With tens of thousands of students, creative writing programs can nourish a culture that appreciates the arts and humanities as human endeavors.

Stephanie Vanderslice: Literary Citizenship! What a great term.

I could have used it as I was finishing my current book, *Rethinking Creative Writing in Higher Education*. The whole last chapter is about that issue, about how creative writing programs need to connect with the community and form a sense of civic responsibility among the next generation of writers. A brilliant example of this,

which exists completely independent of creative writing programs, is Dave Egger's brainchild 826 Valencia, now 826 National[28]. This project oversees the community writing centers run by writers in cities all over the United States. These kinds of connections are mutually beneficial, for the community and for the writer. And, they help to create the next generation of readers!

Literary Citizenship: this term must become part of the creative writing lexicon. I'm going to start using it right away. The next generation of writers and pedagogy scholars can take this up and see where it leads us.

Anna Leahy: We've proposed several areas for future investigation: the *real* position of pedagogy in the profession, the rise of assessment, what's *really* going on in our programs and classrooms, ways to respond to student writing, incorporating digital media, adapting workshop structures to fit different goals and constraints. Literary citizenship, though, may be the most pressing issue of all. That's likely what will determine the future of writers and creative writing teachers for generations to come.

Further Links and Resources

Read more about writing, teaching and new trends in the literary landscape from all three contributors to this round-table discussion on their personal sites:
- **Anna Leahy** at amleahy.com
- **Cathy Day** at cathyday.bigbigweb.com and her blog, The Big Thing.
- **Stephanie Vanderslice** at stephanievanderslice.com and her blog, wordamour.

Interested in how to practice literary citizenship in your own community? There are many organizations that would love your help, including:

- **Community-Word Project**: A New York City based arts-in-education organization that inspires children in underserved communities to read, interpret and respond to their world and to become active citizens through collaborative arts residencies and teacher training programs.
- **826 National**: 826 National is a network of nine nonprofit organizations dedicated to helping students, ages 6-18, with expository and creative writing. Our mission is based on the understanding that great leaps in learning can happen with one-on-one attention, and that strong writing skills are fundamental to future success.
- **Writers In The Schools (WITS) Alliance**: The vision of the WITS Alliance is that every American child will have the opportunity to work with a professional writer to develop the tools necessary for success. The Writers in the Schools Alliance (WITS Alliance) is a professional network of literary arts education programs and individuals who serve K-12 students and provide professional development for their teachers.

Do some investigation in your own city and please let us know of any innovative initiatives on the literary citizenship front.

Citations

15.Mary Swander, "Duck, Duck, Turkey: Using Encouragement to Structure Workshop Assignments," *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom*. 167-179.

16.Nicholas Carr, The Shallows, New York: W.W. Norton, 2010.

17.National Writing Project.

18.Anne Herrington, Kevin Hodgson, and Charles Moran, *Teaching the New Writing: Technology, Change, and Assessment in the 21st Century Classroom*, New York, NY: Teacher's College Press, 2009.

19.*Vectors: Journal of Culture and Technology in a Dynamic Vernacular*
20.National Novel Writing Month.

21.Susan Grimm, Ed., *Ordering the Storm*, Cleveland, OH: CSU Poetry Center, 2006.

22.Scott Jaschik, "No Grading, More Learning," *Inside Higher Ed*: May 3, 2010.

23.Ibid.

24.Ibid.

25.Kelly Ritter and Stephaie Vanderslice, Eds., *Can It Really Be Taught?*, Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2007.

26.Anna Leahy and Larissa Szporluk, "Good Counsel: A Conversation abut Poetry Writing, the Imagination, and Teaching," *Mid-American Review* XXX: 1&2. 57-69.

27.Dinty Moore, *Brevity*.

28.826 National.