RMIT University

Antoni Jach

Triple hats: writing, teaching writing and teaching writing teachers

Abstract

Of course, many teachers who are writers feel they don't need to be taught how to teach. It is often assumed that a good writer will be a good teacher but it isn't always the case. Writing is a specialised skill in the same way that teaching is a specialised skill and new skills can be developed. Over the past four years at RMIT University I have been running in-house teacher training for new teachers for the whole of the School of Creative Media (which includes the disciplines of multimedia, audio-visual and sound production as well as creative writing and editing). In our Professional Writing and Editing course we use practising writers (and editors) to teach in the course and gradually we have been offering teacher training to new staff as a way of assisting teachers with their teaching rather than following the traditional method of throwing teachers in the deep end and hoping they could swim (many could and flourished while others struggled and some drowned). I have created a number of presentations over the years for this teacher training program and the latest is entitled "A Sixteen-Step Guide to Teaching". *This paper will focus on issues to do with writing, teaching writing and teaching writing students.*

(Note: This paper was originally written as a speech; a shorter version of it was delivered on the 24th of November 2001 at the Canberra AAWP conference. This paper is dedicated to the memory of my friend and colleague, Judy Duffy, who died in November 2001 - a great teacher, writer and supporter of the AAWP.)

Introduction

Triple hats: the first hat is writing, the second hat is teaching writing and the third hat is teaching writing teachers, along with teaching many other teachers from RMIT University's School of Creative
Media. The School is a combined TAFE and Higher Education school, offering qualifications from Certificate IV through to PhD level.

There are about 110 teachers, mainly sessionals, who are employed by the School. The majority of those teachers are engaged in professional arts practice and, by and large, they did not intend to become teachers - they intended to be arts practitioners and have arrived at teaching almost by default. We have a whole school made up of teachers who probably didn't intend or want to be teachers in the first place.

Our traditional method in the School of Creative Media of introducing professional arts practitioners into the art and craft of teaching was to provide teachers with a class list, a

room number and a subject
outline and hope for the best. It's the "sink-or-swim" method and many creative writing teachers have done remarkably well in teaching themselves how to teach. But some teachers have struggled with the change of role from being a novelist, a poet, a playwright, a scriptwriter, a short story writer or an editor to becoming a teacher of novel writing, playwriting, scriptwriting, short story writing or editing. This change of role can be exacerbated if the new creative writing teacher has been a student in a creative writing course the year before.

I think the difficulties some new teachers of creative writing teachers may encounter can be summed up under the following topic headings:

1) misunderstanding the role;
2) underestimating the workload, particularly with regard to assessment items;
3) encountering troublesome and/or demanding students ;
4) insecurity about the quality of one's own creative writing and;
5) resentment at having to teach.

I'll look at some of these topics in order.

Topic One: Misunderstanding the role

I think some - and only some, I would like to stress - new creative writing teachers misunderstand their role. What I mean by that is that some new creative writing teachers assume that the class is for their own benefit rather for the benefit of their students. (This attitude is often expressed implicitly through various things that are said. In its most extreme version the general message once it's decoded goes something like this: teaching is simply a different form of an Australia Council grant. You fill in time, you do as little as you can for your students, they should feel lucky to have you, you get paid and you go and do your own writing.)

How does this attitude manifest itself in the classroom or in the tutorial room?

If the class is for the benefit of the teacher then the following things occur:

- The teacher talks and talks and the students simply listen - the students are there as audience.
- The teacher's opinion is the only opinion that matters and it is the definitive opinion. An example: The teacher says, "This is the best short story you're ever likely to read," rather than, "Here's a short story - what do you think of it?"
- The teacher's writing is the only writing that matters. Example: The teacher says, "I'll spend the first three classes reading from my selected works - to show you how to do it".
- The students are there for "ego-stroking" (i.e. to "stroke the ego" of the writing teacher).
- The students are meant to "disappear" during class-time and afterwards so that the teacher can get on with the important matters that he/she has to do.
- The students are considered to be "lesser" than the teacher and therefore have no say in the way the class is run.
- The teacher is "unavailable" for the students: either "physically" - not present for the whole of the class time, and can't be found out of class hours; or is not emotionally present for the student. Example: The teacher says, or implies, "I couldn't care less about your work - it's unimportant".
- The teacher takes out his or her anger on the students. Example: The teacher says, "You should give up!" or says to a student in front of the rest of the class, "This is

a piece of crap!"
- The teacher does not understand, respect or show any interest in the student and his/her aspirations.
- And the teacher only wants to work with the "gifted few" - the two or three brilliant students - rather than with the whole class and directs all of his/her attention towards those two or three.

Now those situations just mentioned are probably rare. Most creative writing teachers I know are working generously and tirelessly for their students. My former colleague Judy Duffy is a good example of a teacher who sacrificed her own writing career for the sake of the careers of her novel-writing tudents. She was a generous and inspirational teacher who put her students first.

Most creative writing teachers I know are working for the benefit of their students. When a teacher is working for the benefit of their students then the following things occur:

- The teacher puts aside his/her own writing for the duration of the class (the focus is on the writing of the student rather than that of the teacher).
- The teacher puts the student number one - "students come first" - while on duty as a teacher.
- The teacher cares about the task at hand - the teaching of creative writing - and respects the students as fellow writers and respects their endeavours.
- The teacher is "present" for the students: both "physically" and emotionally.
- And the teacher remembers Richard Ford's advice about never underestimating a young writer: "You just can never tell, though, how a young writer will develop."

What a student picks up immediately in a classroom or a tutorial room is whether the teacher cares - about them as individuals and about their writing - or doesn't care and whether the teacher likes or doesn't like them.

Topic Two: Underestimating the workload, particularly with regard to assessment items

Beginning creative writing teachers usually underestimate the workload. They take note of the class contact hours that are mentioned but they don't factor in all the additional hours for preparation and correction (especially in the first year of teaching where the beginner is often teaching themselves to teach as well as preparing new material or customizing someone else's material).

Topic Three: Encountering troublesome and/or demanding students

Creative writing is an area where we traditionally encounter students who are sensitive and/or neurotic and/or brilliant. Student Counselling Services at RMIT used to tell me regularly when I was coordinator of the course that they were seeing more creative writing students than students in any other discipline area in the whole university. As well, Student Administration used to tell me that our creative writing students were the rudest in the whole university. Our average per class is one difficult student per group of 25. This paper is not the place to go into a list of ways in which students have been difficult in the past nor is it a place to go into remedies for dealing with difficult students (that would take a whole other paper) but let me say in passing that difficult students are often crying out for attention (they want to be noticed and respected) and once they are given the amount of attention and respect they are demanding they often settle down. (I have created a whole PowerPoint presentation on this topic that I deliver to staff upon request.)

Topic Four: Insecurity about the quality of one's own creative writing

This is a very sensitive topic for teachers of creative writing. The almost-Faustian pact is made: it almost invariably occurs that the students' writing improves at the expense of the teacher's own writing (the student gets stronger as the teacher gets weaker). The teacher puts time into someone else's writing rather than her/his own; but then that is the nature of the job. Teachers simply run out of time. They are so busy helping their students with their writing, helping their best students to find agents and publication opportunities that they run out of time to concentrate on their own writing. The psychologically dangerous outcome of this - with repercussions for the students - is topic heading five: resentment at having to teach.

Topic Five: Resentment at having to teach

I'll approach this topic by commencing with a series of generalisations (which may or may not be correct).

To generalise - 1: Writers want to write rather than to teach writing and yet they have to teach writing in order to earn money so that they can pursue their first love, of writing.

To generalise - 2: Students want to learn how to write so they can get published and feel justified in writing and in calling themselves writers.

The resentment of teaching creative writing is expressed in such statements as the following (and all of these I've heard writing teachers say over the past 13 years):

- "When I teach writing I can't write."
- "Teaching is taking time away from my own writing."
- "When I finally sit down to write I'm too exhausted to write anything." And
- "When my writing is going badly it's disturbing to have students who write so well."

Have you heard statements like these?

So for outsiders, at least, the situation of the creative writing teacher may appear to be conflictual for two reasons:

1) Often teachers aren't that keen to teach creative writing while students are desperate to learn.
2) And we are training our direct competitors. We are often competing for publication, for grants and for residencies with our students (at least this is the case at RMIT).

The way out?

Therefore, if we step back from this situation we can see that there is the potential for a fundamental conflict of interest between the professional needs of the teacher - to write and continue to be published and the professional needs of the students - to write and to get published.

What is the way out of this double-hatted situation? (By the way, the phrase "double-hat" itself implies at the least a potential conflict of interest if we look at definition in

the Macquarie Dictionary: "to wear two hats" means "to hold two official appointments at the same time".) So what is to be done?

I think the only way out is this:

> 1) To manage any possible resentment towards our students (I personally want my students to succeed).
> 2) And to try to balance the two hats - writing and teaching writing - successfully so that we can maintain careers both as writers and teachers without one of those roles sabotaging the other.

In terms of "balance", one of the strategies I employ is to ask myself, "What is my role here at this moment? Am I acting as a *writer* or as a *teacher* in this particular situation?" And if the answer is, "My current role is as a teacher," then I focus on my students and give them a hundred percent of my attention. Another "balancing" strategy is to devote more time to writing: I now work part-time rather than full-time and I look for ways to take "leave-without-pay" from teaching. Because in teaching - and especially in creative writing teaching due to its emotional demands on top of workload demands - there is always the danger of "burn-out".

The third hat - Teaching teaching

Now I would like to turn briefly to the third hat - teaching arts professionals how to teach. This is fraught with problems as you can imagine. Many teachers resent even being invited to attend a teacher training seminar, though occasionally you will find a new teacher who is eager to learn. (Just as an aside - is there another paradox here? We have students desperate to learn, and teachers not keen to teach and not keen to learn. Though I should add that those who aren't interested in attending teacher training fear a) that the seminars will be a waste of time and b) they won't learn anything they don't already know anyway.)

The teacher training program that I run - and it's mainly for new teachers - has three aspects to it:

> 1) Teacher training seminars.
> 2) Staff enrolling as students in one of my novel writing classes.
> 3) And mentoring.

Firstly, new teachers will be invited to attend at least two three- to four-hour seminars in their first year of teaching. Secondly, teachers are able to enrol as students in my classes (or in other teachers' classes). For example this year (2001) one of my students in novel writing was the poet, and staff-member, Lisa Jacobson. Thirdly, mentoring consists of teachers being able to make a time to see me to talk about teaching issues. Some staff-members are reluctant to talk about their teaching problems with their boss so it can be very useful for them to have someone, who is not a boss, to talk to.

Attitude is as important as content

Now to move on to my next point: in creative writing teaching, attitude is as important as content.

As creative writing teachers we are not simply teachers of content but "bearers of attitude". We are not simply teaching a subject, rather we are teaching a subject to *someone*. We can present a subject without anyone being present in the room but when we teach a class or a tutorial a transaction takes place.

Teaching is every bit about contact as it is about content. An emphasis on "What am I going to teach today?" obscures a deeper question which is "*Who* am I going to teach today?" and also disguises a problematic question "What does to teach mean anyway?"

"Content" is everywhere. Students can go and buy books by Kate Grenville, Carmel Bird and Garry Disher on how to write if they want content but students also come to creative writing classes for contact; they want contact with other students and with their teacher. They want to learn something about themselves as much as learning about "content". They want to test themselves; discover themselves and creative writing just happens to have become their chosen vehicle to make something
happen in their lives (and it can become their principal means of understanding themselves and their place in the world).

Having interviewed mature age students over a 13-year period, often the implicit or explicit request on our writing course is that the students want the course to change their lives. That is often the plea that
emerges from the interview process; and it is an incredible weight to place on any course - the expectations are often unsustainable.

Creative writing teachers by and large have the content under control; occasionally it's the attitude that needs working on. What's an appropriate attitude towards our students? Well, for me, I feel the
following statement is appropriate: "I want my students to succeed". Many students want to get published but only a handful will get published, so I'm not talking, specifically, about success in those terms. Students have a more immediate aim: they want to get better at writing. That is where we, as teachers of creative writing, can help our students - if we have the right attitude.

Helping students with their writing is as much about the attitude we have towards them as individuals as it is about helping them on a technical level. Freud talked about the Golden Seed - it's that self-belief that has been given to an individual by a parent or a teacher. If we can instill confidence, a justifiable confidence, into a student then the student takes control and teaches himself/herself. (It's like building a well for a village rather than shipping in a truckload of bottled water.)

Understanding the role of the creative writing teacher

Now if one side of the coin is misunderstanding the role, then what's the other side of the coin?

My understanding of the role of the creative writing teacher is as follows. I believe that as creative writing teachers we need to do the following things in the classroom/tutorial room situation. We have to:

1. Prepare each class.
2. Focus on the students and on our own readiness to teach.
3. Welcome the students.
4. Connect with the students.
5. Care about our students and the subject we teach.
6. Perform in the classroom/tutorial room.
7. Perceive what's going on in the classroom and change tack if necessary.
8. Listen to our students as they will tell us what they need.
9. Help students to find their voice.
10. Encourage students and build self-esteem.
11. Respect students as fellow human beings and as writers.
12. Coach the individuals in our classes to succeed.

13. Inspire so that students have the courage to pursue their aspirations.
14. Develop a teaching style that is appropriate.
15. Reflect continually upon the art and craft of teaching.
16. Attend to all the practicalities that the Unit, Department, School, Faculty and University requires.
And lastly we have to:
17. Acknowledge that as teachers we can't do everything. We will always disappoint some students. We cannot be all things to all people. We do what we can; and we do our best within the given constraints.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would simply like to say that teaching creative writing is an act of generosity. Yes, we do get paid to do it but at the end of the day we are helping to develop our competitors (as writers and as potential teachers of creative writing) and those who will replace us.

The best creative writing teachers are often those who are the most generous - with their time, with their encouragement, with their intelligence and with their inspiration. But the conundrum still remains: How do we successfully balance those double hats? For the most generous teachers are often the least generous when it comes to their own writing - they simply run out of time and the energy to write. (W.B. Yeats' question is relevant here: "Perfection of the Life or of the Art?") For creative writing teaching wants all of our waking moments and art requires those same waking moments to flourish. The choice as to how
to balance the double hats is, in the end, a choice for every individual writer-teacher to make.

Antoni Jach is a novelist and a poet. His latest novel is The Layers of the City *(Sceptre). He is a part-time teacher of Novel Writing at RMIT University.*

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Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady
Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au