Curtin University

Brian Dibble

'An Idiot of the Present or a Genius of the Future?': Some Problems, Some Promise

I want to deal briefly with creative writing topics which, if not innately related, are relatable via our classroom experience/s: (1) apprenticing/mentoring, (2) handling classes comprised of students conspicuously "other" with respect to (say) race, class, gender and national origin and (3) dealing with the literary equivalent of an idiot savant. Along the way I will throw in a few anecdotes that might be usefully distracting or somehow *à propos* by stroke of luck. The first half of my title ("An Idiot . . .") is a phrase from the keynote speech my colleague Elizabeth Jolley gave at the inaugural Australian Association of Writing Programs meeting at the University of Technology Sydney in 1996: she said that sometimes when marking papers she wondered if she were dealing with an idiot of the present or a genius of the future.

In the 1970s I had as a student a mature-aged woman I will call Mrs X, someone 20 years older than I, who constituted one of those trials we sometimes have to endure. She was a very pleasant, presentable, personable and kindly-spoken individual, apparently quite eager to learn. But she seemed quite incapable of understanding what I was talking about and of doing what I requested, despite the fact that no one else in the class had such troubles. Mrs X's assignments were always wrong or wrong-headed in most conceivable ways: on the wrong topic, of the wrong length, from the wrong point of view, using the wrong style, and so on, to no good effect - I would, of course, have been quite happy if the contrary path she chose was better than the one I had directed her to follow. Further, her work always seemed extraordinarily juvenile although she was not writing stories or poems for children. The best thing about her assignments was that they were nicely typed and proofread, making failing her less of a chore.

I gave her what help I could, but she never managed to pass an assignment. At first, she would remonstrate in personal letters to me, with which I would not engage in writing - when I saw her I would again tell her in clear but gentle terms what I thought and then say I would not change her mark. Eventually, I started to get letters from members of her family, saying her assignment had been read at their dinner table and that they found it to be of much higher quality than I had, and so they too remonstrated with me to change my mark. At this point, I asked a colleague to advise me and, counselled by him, I responded as before. Finally, I started receiving letters from a convent in Melbourne where the woman's sister was a nun, saying that her story had been read around the refectory table, and that all of the nuns thought I was very wrong in my judgement. They prayed (they said) that I would revise my marks, but I was implacable. Fortunately the semester ended before I received an approach from You Know Who. Mrs X did not go on to become a genius of the future...

The assignments I set that class did not constitute mentoring, for they were just the type of finger exercises that many of us use at the first-year level to get the students writing. I regard apprenticing or mentoring as potentially a problematic issue. Mentor, the wise old man Odysseus chose to tutor his son, was concerned to train Telemachus in the "right" ways of thinking and doing (*Odyssey*, III).

I have two concerns about the concept of "'right' ways of thinking and doing." One is that I have seen the relationship work in ways that disturb me, as illustrated most graphically (pardon the puns) in Schools of Art when many of a lecturer's students graduate as painters or sculptors or print-makers who seem like clones of that lecturer. Even when we consciously strive to be catholic in our approaches, I suspect that we are probably mentoring more in favour of some directions than others. It is natural that we should do so, for why would we commend to our students what we regard to be bad in theory and/or practice? We can perhaps all think of examples of this abuse from the world of the teaching of creative writing - in our colleagues' work if not in our own!

Secondly, the thought of imposing my "artistic self" on my students makes me feel uncomfortable. I believe that I am like most colleagues in that my impulse or imperative to write is driven by my circumstances which, if not wholly, a least are in significant part unique to me; and I think that, like most colleagues, my capacity to write is facilitated by techniques I have appropriated and/or developed from works I have heard, read and seen from a list likewise mine. To impose that self on my students would be to efface them in advance and to limit their future possibilities.

While in charge of creative writing at Curtin I have tried to address that issue by using as many Writers in Residence, Adjunct Teaching Fellows, and part-timers as possible, so that during their three years in creative writing our undergraduate students are exposed to writers with a variety of personalities (collectively, not individually!) who are interested in a variety of genres, techniques and styles of writing. Over our thirty years that regime has produced an impressive display of writers available to our students: this year's visitors are Tracy Ryan (winner of the 1999 WA Premier's Poetry Prize for *The Willing Eye*) and Alan Wearne (winner of the 2002 NSW Premier's Poetry Award for *The Lovemaker* [vol I]), two writers not likely to be confused with each other. I realise that routinely using part-time or visiting staff rather than contract staff can be industrially provocative, but we consciously seek out writers who in fact want such work in order to pay the bills while they continue to write. The Iowa Writers' Workshop has followed a comparable policy for decades: this year, in addition to their seven tenured staff members, they have six visiting colleagues, one fiction writer and five poets.

I am aware of the fact that what I worry about is not so problematic in the natural sciences. That is, lecturers in biology or chemistry or physics often use their students effectively as extensions of themselves in order to impose one coherent research method onto some research problem. But that is partly because those lecturers and their disciplines are more concerned with developing sameness rather than difference in their students, in their belief that their disciplines are objective and rational rather than otherwise. If that trial-and-error approach makes development in science predictably slow, that progress is sometimes punctuated by happy accidents like Friedrich Kekule's getting drunk and then dreaming of a circle of monkeys each holding the tail of the one in front - when he woke he understood the structure of the benzene ring, and thereby he was able to lay the basis for the new science of organic chemistry. And occasionally there are non-compliant rebels like Steven Hawking who stand back and suddenly see the world from an entirely new perspective. I don't worry about students choosing one university over another so that they might study with some particular science lecturer or professor - in fact I think it is quite an intelligent thing to do. On reflection, I can even imagine that Basho's seventeenth-century school for haiku writers was organised along the lines of a science laboratory.

My worry about apprenticeship/mentoring in creative writing might be a cultural matter. That is, the approach I have described as Curtin's might be inflected by American practices, such as those at Iowa. By contrast, the Oxbridge tradition seemed to encourage British students in the arts to seek a mentor; and that Oxbridge tradition was largely reified in Australia, as Leigh Dale elegantly demonstrates in her

book on the foundation professors of English in Australia, *The English Men: Professing Literature in Australia* ([Canberra]: ASAL: 1997). But to say that my approach is culturally inflected is not to say that it is without merit.

My position on mentoring is to expose undergraduate creative writing students to as many different lecturers as possible. But my position with Honours and especially graduate students is to facilitate mentoring relationships if that is what the student wants. That is, it seems more appropriate to me to do that after a student has surveyed what is available and defined her/his own interests and talents more precisely. And I believe that talented lecturers are capable of working in both modes, sometimes like Socrates, sometimes like Protagoras (or Mentor), as it were. When we do not have a variety of staff members for the students to circulate among, then we should find new constructive ways to use the workshop system of generating student responses to each other's work. Further, to my mind it is important that we define our "speaking positions" for our students, letting them know our theoretical/critical positions, our preferred canon, our own writing concerns, methods and techniques.

At the honours and graduate level facilitating mentoring relationships should include our directing would-be students to the most appropriate supervisor, even if that person might not be at our own institution but elsewhere locally or even interstate. Nothing can be more stultifying for a student than a mismatch in the student-supervisor relationship: except for the rare self-motivating and low-maintenance student, s/he is largely or wholly dependent on the supervisor, and that is a great responsibility for the supervisor - you or me. Imaginably a student in the sciences can learn from someone s/he does not get on with, because there is a laboratory project "over there," and when they are talking the student and supervisor are talking in reference to that third position. But that is harder to imagine in the creative writing situation where the project is "in there", in the student's head, and whenever the student and supervisor are talking they are directly or indirectly talking about that fact.

With over thirty university programs in creative writing in Australia it is possible to know that a student who approaches us would be best-off studying with a colleague somewhere else. However, while it is easy to say that a student would be better suited studying at an institution other than one's own, it often is not a practicable proposition. Job ties, domestic considerations and costs of relocating often preclude that possibility. At the same time, I am aware of more and more students doing so: several years ago one came from Melbourne to study at the UWA, last year one went from Curtin to the UQ, and this year one came from Canberra and another from Melbourne to Curtin.

As an alternative to students having to relocate, I am hopeful that more external and/or online creative writing units will soon be available, such that students enrolled in institution A could also study at institution B and/or C, accessing subjects not available at the home institution, or subjects not available at the home institution in a given semester. (In her paper "Teaching Creative Writing Online" delivered at the AAWP's 2001 conference in Canberra, Marcelle Freiman of Macquarie gave an impressive demonstration of the potential for online work.) Such flexible modes of study would allow us to advertise our more attractive/effective units/lecturers so that students could choose from a broad menu. Western Australian universities have devised a system for cross-institutional enrolments, meaning that students at Curtin can study units at Edith Cowan, Murdoch, Notre Dame and the UWA, and my students routinely do so, whether in creative writing or support areas like classics or languages. If the traffic between and among the various institutions is roughly the same, then there is no need for one institution to bill the other/s for the excess, and that is the situation that has obtained until now. If the AAWP thinks the concept worthy of support, it might want to volunteer itself as a monitor of that traffic Australia-wide.

My second point - how to deal with a class of students conspicuously "other" in terms of (say) race, class and gender - is one that I raise with some embarrassment, since I have usually been able to regard the classroom as a pleasant place without systemic tensions, although there always are narcissists and off-the-wall cranks. However, an increasingly common experience for me is to find sexual preference to be an issue in the classroom, especially when there is a wide spectrum of students of different ages/backgrounds and one or more of the students is an outspoken straight, gay or lesbian. Depictions of same-sex partnerships or same-sex sexual relations can bring the class to a halt or fuel angry debates having little to do with creative writing: they are not lofty ideological debates but deeply personal and ugly ones, exactly the sort of thing to fracture a class along many different fault lines.

Race/class/gender questions - questions relating to "otherness" - lead me to the concept of "the foreign", as in overseas students. Part of my work as Head of School involves me in recruiting overseas students, many of whom are interested in professional writing and publication units. They often hide a few creative writing units in their transcripts because creative writing is what they really want to do but fear that employers might not be comfortable with. My experience is that in the creative writing classroom with such a mixed group of students the problem is actually quite complex: on the one hand, local WASP students who are the great majority just want to keep on with their development as Australian would-be writers; but, on the other hand, overseas students also want to keep on with their development, but as (say) Malaysian or Singaporean writers. We must develop strategies to deal with that, not only in the classroom but also in the mentoring relationship.

Personally, my most troubling experience in regard to the race/class/gender complex was with an undergraduate student from Zimbabwe who several years ago submitted a draft story that basically described black Africans entering a hut to join people already there, talking, eating and drinking, and then leaving. The response of my Australian students was an unspoken "Ho hum", evidenced by dead silence and a studious looking at walls. I was struggling myself, only slightly sensitised to the story's conventions and nuances by an imaginative leap made possible from having read Stephen Muecke's contribution (27-35) to the section on Aboriginal oral literature in Laurie Hergenhan (ed.), *New Literary History of Australia* (Ringwood:: Penguin, 1988) - I realised that the common denominators were not so much colour as bushland settings and tribal peoples. Thus I was able to engender some (but not much) discussion about the nuances implied in the story by who sat where, who did/did not speak, about what, to whom, etc. I believe it is fair to say that my Australian students in the class would have been more willing to engage in extended dialogue if the student had been white rather than black and male rather than female.

In other words, homophobia and racism in the creative writing classroom are issues I must learn to deal with better. The problem remains a conundrum to me, and I hope others can propose ways of dealing with it. Colleagues at the 2001 AAWP conference in Canberra were aware of the problem and supportive in their suggestions about how to foreground it in syllabi and in the orientation lecture we give for each of our units. Perhaps colleagues at the next AAWP conference would like to make those topics - race, class, gender and national origin - the focus of one of its sessions.

Finally I come to the idiots and geniuses, and so another anecdote is in order. I once had another student - Mr Y - who was quite different from the first one I described in that he seemed to follow all of my instructions precisely to the letter and beyond. For example, his assignments were always longer than what I had requested, he had always read the books I recommended when I had no real hope that anyone would do so. And his assignments were always carefully researched, something not usual with most of the other ones I received. At the same time they had an odd, dull aura about them, as if written by someone incapable of experiencing or expressing feeling in the

same way we do - Oliver Sacks talks about one such person in the title story of his book *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales* (London: Picador, 1995).

One of Student Y's researched pieces was on the comic-book character the Phantom, the creation of Lee Falk (1911-1999) (1) When I was a child, The Ghost Who Walks was my favourite character from the comics, perhaps because I liked dogs and thought his wolf-dog, Devil, was a fine wolf-dog. Student Y's research suggested that the comic-strip Phantom was a reincarnation of a fourteenth-century Portuguese folk-hero, the Portuguese origin perhaps explaining his migration to Africa. Just as in the comics, the Phantom also showed up in student's Y's story six centuries later, showing no signs of age, wear, tear or even cynicism, after all the evil he had had to deal with, all the wrongs he had to right. Instead of being in comic-strip Africa, in Student Y's piece he showed up in short-story India, understandably since he was in search of his girlfriend The Beautiful Diana who at the time was living there.

It turned out that The Beautiful Diana was working for a United Nations medical doctor who provided birth-control advice to Indian people and abortions to those women who needed them. Having been there a while, and having been good at his work, his patients became fewer and fewer. And so he devised a night-time job for himself, raping women throughout the city in order to create more business, along the way acquiring a sexually-transmitted disease. When the Phantom finally found The Beautiful Diana working in this conflicted doctor's surgery, he arranged to meet with her that evening and, according to my student-author, he furgled her (Y's word, not mine), as evidently had previously been his wont. In fact the Phantom and The Beautiful Diana furgled quite a number of times in the next week or two. At these intimate moments the Devil always discreetly absented himself.

Thereby The Ghost Who Walks acquired the STD as well because, all unbeknownst to him, The Beautiful Diana had also been furgling with the doctor. This became evident in the scene that most held my attention, namely the one where the Phantom stopped to relieve himself. I read this scene with great attention because I always wondered how he accomplished this vital act, given the nature of the costume he wore. It appeared to consist of a purple head-to-toe bodysuit over which he wore what looked like diagonally striped black-and-purple Speedos with a wide belt above them featuring a skeleton's head, along with boots very much like a boxer's: I could only imagine that he entered the bodysuit feet-first through the face hole. (Why this question did not occur to me while he was furgling The Beautiful Diana I do not know.) Alas, Student Y did not reveal how the trick was accomplished - perhaps The Ghost Who (Otherwise) Walked would stop, take off a boot, and roll up the leg of his bodysuit when nature called? However, Y did reveal that in the process of relieving himself the Phantom came to realise, from a burning sensation and a telltale drip-dripping, that he had caught a venereal disease. (It is unclear where Devil was at this significant moment.)

Disgusted with The Beautiful (and Promiscuous) Diana, and taking the place where she lived and worked as a metonym for the metropolis that encourages low morals and facilitates base behaviour, The Ghost Who Walks resolved to walk (with Devil of course) some hundreds of miles away where he would live in a pygmy community, presumably a colonising group sent abroad by the poison pygmy people he was familiar with in Africa. He did so, according to my student-author, because "the population was smaller there."

Having read and reread the bizarre and exceedingly overlong piece, I was at a loss to know how to evaluate it, particularly because of its ambiguous last line. Effectively I was wondering if I were dealing with an idiot of the present or a genius of the future. My wise colleague (not Elizabeth Jolley) advised me to talk to Student Y and indirectly determine whether or not he had meant the conclusion to be funny: if he had not, then he was an idiot of the present; and if he had, then he was a genius of the

future, if not of the present as well. Alas, the blank-faced and flat-voiced Y told me that he saw nothing whatsoever funny in the conclusion, but rather considered the story as a whole to be both sad and tragic. Whether in response to my low mark or symbolic of his general misdirection, he was last heard of driving a tractor at seeding time in the wheat belt some several hundred miles east of Perth. One would hesitate to ask what he called "seeding".

By way of contrast, I am pleased to say that we might have a genius of the present in our classes at present - I'll call him Z. His work is so odd and so engaging, so researched and yet experimental, so personal and yet rhetorical, that I am left open-mouthed after reading it. He tells me how helpful my lectures are, how useful my suggestions, and I want to ask *which* lecture, *which* suggestion, which *phrase* or *word* or *syllable* of either of them? But I hold back because I don't believe a word of what he says because the other students' submissions are perfectly ordinary.

I am at a loss as to how I might help this person. Workshopping it is not a productive business because he reads his own work badly. Not surprisingly, his classmates cannot find a way to get a handle on his work, and I am not much help to them. The best I can do is to praise his work lavishly but cryptically (because I actually don't know how to critique it) and desperately suggest books he might like to read. Like the student in the second anecdote, he reads them too, and his subsequent work always reflects that, as when he wrote a quite credible sonnet about Rupert Brooke improbably reading Wordsworth. There might be effusions of Gerard Manley Hopkins soon since, as a desperate measure, I gave him my copy to read in the pathetic hope that Hopkins' imagery would appeal like bright baubles to him... Student Z is in fact like an idiot savant in our institutional situation in that it is unclear if his background and/or his environment - the classroom in this case, the recommended reading, his out-of-class meetings with his lecturers - have anything to do with his remarkable accomplishments. I know little about his off-campus life. As his lecturer, I just stand by, perplexed about what I might say if anyone asks if I had anything to do with his remarkable poems and stories.

In conclusion, I am also pleased to be able to say that I was astonished to learn that Student Z is the son of the woman I referred to in my first anecdote: when I walked into the classroom at the start of Semester One last year and saw his surname on my class list, I asked, "Are you related to Mrs X?" and he said, "Yup, she's me Mum - we used to talk about you when we read her returned assignments around the dinner table..." Perhaps this is You Know Who's ironic way of taking revenge on me. Whatever, I feel more fortunate than furgled.

Notes

(1) My thanks to Ruth Le Brun of Frew Publications in Sydney (the Australian publisher of Phantom comics) for providing me with information and the latest installment (No 1317). For the record: the comic-book Phantom and The Beautiful Diana were married 24 November 1977 and they had twins on 5 June 1979. Return to article

Brian Dibble holds a personal chair in Comparative Literature at Curtin University where he also teaches Creative Writing. He has just finished a biography of Leonard Jolley and is at work on a biography of Elizabeth Jolley.

Notes and Debate

Brian Dibble and Julienne van Loon
The Higher Degree Research Journey as a Three-legged Race Vol 8 No 2 October 2004

TEXT
Vol 6 No 2 October 2002
http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/
Editors: Nigel Krauth & Tess Brady
Text@mailbox.gu.edu.au