

Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus

Inez Baranay and Glenda Guest

Stripping the Muse

Abstract

Inez Baranay and Glenda Guest, while teaching at Griffith University School of Arts at the Gold Coast Campus in first semester 1998, talked of co-presenting a paper at the AAWP Conference. They wanted to discuss the problems of teaching writing while simultaneously trying to practise the craft and research/write a PhD. Then Guest moved to Canberra.

The paper evolved from an on-going e-mail conversation over several months. A virtual chat that at various times seemed to go nowhere. Too polite to each other, they said, too ladylike. So the gloves came off, Baranay developed her theme and Guest wove around it, and the following is the result.

1. IB

A visiting friend and I had a long conversation about this whole thing about teaching creative writing. She is my age and a much-published writer, and when we were students the idea that you became a writer by doing a course simply did not exist. We said, what if there had been courses like these when we were at university? We found we each, she in Melbourne and me in Sydney, had been the kind of students who, how to say this, did not conform; we did not seek or accept approval; we were not one of the ones accepting and elaborating the critical positions most in favour at the time. How would that have translated into being students of writing rather than of literature?

Plus, the stuff we wrote when we were so young was pretty dreadful. But no-one had to know that. If they had known, and told you, would you have been able to keep on? And then, say you're a teacher and you read something from a student - like this book we just heard about, that this friend said was the worst thing she had ever read whether in manuscript or between covers? But it is a book by a best-selling author. And if you had been her teacher you may not have been able to see that, even if it wasn't your kind of thing, it was a type of writing that would do very well. And then, how do you teach someone to be a writer? Writing cannot be taught, my friend says firmly. But, I say, but it can be learned. That is the point, right, about these courses. You see, I say - I teach writing and she does not - among the students there is here and there a real writer. And that person comes to the course as their way to do their writing, talk about writing, talk to someone who's been at it for way longer and has made it their profession.

2. GG

The attack didn't last very long - but it was fearful at the time. Panic and Reason in battle.

I can't do this! Why not?

I'm not an 'authority' Who said you had to be?

I'm not trained as a teacher. So!! Try another word. Motivator. Enabler. You've run workshops for theatre - use the model.

I don't know enough. How much do you have to know - you always over-research. You write. Your degree has a solid grounding of cultural and writing theory, and cross arts participation. You read. You can field questions - or refer them to readings.

What if I miss the next Elizabeth Jolley? So what? If they're good they'll stay good.

They'll know I'm a fraud. AHA! So that's it. You don't want to look vulnerable. You've taken the job, so just put on the mask of the muse and act.

You've got to be joking! I don't want to be anyone's muse. You know what Stevie Smith wrote about her muse and their relationship

*Who is this that howls and mutters?
It is the Muse each word she utters*

*Is thrown against a shuttered door
And very soon she'll speak no more.* (Smith 1978)

Stop worrying, grumped Reason. All you can do is tell them how it was for you. And point them towards other writers who talk about their own methodology. Tell your songline into writing. Show them that there are many ways to do things, and that, ultimately, the writing stands alone.

3. IB

Yes! I said, now taking the defensive position, you can see the courses as the equivalent of our writers groups of the 70s.

Those groups, she argued, were of consenting adults who came together with a basis in common politics and knowing who else would be there. And didn't you say some of your students are 18 years old?

They are, I admitted dismally, straight out of school, and I do want to say to them, go out into the world and live! That's your assignment! Leave home, hitchhike, get a one-way ticket to somewhere, get into some trouble, then let's see about writing!

4. GG

There are some things in the creative process about which it is not possible to speak - and one's personal muse may be one. Another is about the divine synchronicity of when the whole world seems to attach itself to your writing. I did, just once, in a class, and felt such a prat that it wasn't repeated.

There are things each must find out for oneself.

I have no doubt that there are tertiary teachers who are "inspirational" - I have had the good fortune to know one or two. But is it the role of the teacher to be the muse? To be the one who pulls together the various streams? Maybe we can consider a job well done if one or two students recognise that there are many and diverse knowledges necessary to form the rich humus which feeds the writing.

5. IB

No, the teacher cannot ask herself to be a muse. The great yoga guru BKS Iyengar says "your guru is your practice".

But you know what makes me uneasy. Let me quote from Kevin Brophy's book *Creativity*. It's this:

The current sunny view of creativity as an enriching, therapeutic and containable endeavour to be promoted and overseen by government grant givers, writers centres and educational institutions. ... Where is the acknowledgement of creativity's darkness, its danger, its sickness, its "empathy with perversion"? (Brophy 1998)

Yes, I think, that is my experience of writing: it is to some degree about mystery, perversion, neurosis, obsession, irrationality. How do you tell students that the best ones among them are the most riddled with self-doubt and anxiety?

6. GG

These knowledges which are contained in the self are rarely what mum or dad would like to hear - or even our friends who know us as "the writer". They can subvert and question. They can expose the dark underbelly. They can, as well as inspire, and without us knowing it, from fear try to stop us writing. Fear of exposing or hurting someone we love. Fear of exposing or hurting oneself by exploration of the landscapes of the mind.

No, very often not enriching and therapeutic. Very often frightening and uncontrollable. The best writers, as Frank Moorhouse has said, "write to the edge of their being." A scary place indeed.

7. IB

Well, said my visiting friend, now taking the positive view, you at least are teaching a course that can't hurt anyone! This is a course designed by a writer and it's a good course, more of a general arts course, that provides the opportunity for students to discuss aspects of their culture.

There are a lot of good things to say about writing courses. The fact that it's an acknowledgement that the creator of the text has as much business in the university as the person who criticises the text. The fact that the undeniable benefit of creative writing courses is that they give employment to writers - if they had no other purpose, they are justified by that! And hey! other people suggest cheerily of course one thing at least: - the courses ensure there'll be more and better readers of novels. Alas, no, we teachers confess. I say to my students, there is no one true thing to say about writing that is always true at all times but only one thing and it is this: read. Writers read, they read a lot, they read everything and you must read. And they say no. No, they say, there is so-and-so rich-and-famous writer on the TV and they said they never read. No, I don't want to be influenced. No, I want to find my own voice. No, I haven't got time.

8. GG

Reading, I say to a fresh-from-school student who asked for the one thing that was essential to writing. Read everything from the cornflake packet to mythology. It's the essence.

I'm at university, she said. I haven't got time to read!

9. IB

I say, here is one thing that is nearly always true: writing is rewriting. No, they say. No, I wrote this down and so it is done. No, first thought best thought, the first thing is the only honest thing, and Kerouac and Burroughs are the ones I like and they never rewrote.

9a GG

Why? Why do young men - and it seems generally to be young men - why do young men want to model on this pair? And particularly on Kerouac?

Is it that they make it look easy by denying the years - for Kerouac, anyway - of re-writing before publication? Is it the on-going myth of the romance of writing? Is it because, from this distance, Burroughs and Kerouac personify all that was 'Cool, Man' about the Beat Gen. - as in :

"Gee Mum, I'm gonna be a writer, wear black, and sit for three days straight to write my best seller. Just leave cigarettes, booze and drugs at the door."

9b. IB

Sometimes I think creative writing courses really were invented for the teacher's sake: it can be a buzz, teaching: you get stimulated and encouraged, able to discover what you know, grateful to be able to articulate it.

10. GG

And I find that I really enjoy the students. Even the ones who are only there because it seemed like an easy unit. They find it's not, of course. They find that to make something look effortless takes a great deal of effort. That working with words is fraught with pitfalls.

11. IB

Sometimes teaching seems only draining and of dubious value. After some years at it, I observe my own little repertoire of stories, jokes and sayings and fear I'm becoming mechanical ...

12. GG

"Words are like tadpoles. You think you have them held tightly to meaning when they slip away and turn into something else."

13. IB

...and then I'm not sure I can learn any more from teaching beginner writers. It's so very different from teaching beginner yoga students, which I also do. In yoga practice you have to keep coming back to your beginnings, to the foundations. In writing practice, you have to move on. Don't you? My visiting friend told me that at one creative writing course it's an assignment to submit something to a publisher so as to experience the rejection. Gee, what do the publishers say about that?

14. GG

Why publication? Is this important in a writing course?

15. IB

Publication is for many writers the completion of the process. But I would never insist it has to be so for everyone. You don't have to aim for the concert hall if you play the piano, you don't have to aim for Wimbledon if you play tennis, you don't have to sell tickets to a display of your grounds if you garden. Also, I think we have to question the value and practices of mainstream publishing. I promote the idea of self-publishing. With so many creative writing courses in existence, there must be an opportunity for a publishing program, or maybe it's a distribution program, where students publish their own work and have it distributed among the other participating institutions. They'll have a good size audience (or is the word "market") for their early work. It might cost too much, though - and don't say internet.

16. GG

What then is creative writing? Is it something that must be published? Must it be "commercial" or "literary"? Must it be read - preferably by as many as possible - to be legitimated? Our society's acknowledgement of what is considered worthwhile is by payment of money. Is this what must happen for writing to be "good"? (This of course opens another line of discussion that cannot be included here.)

17. IB

Are we going to teach that what is good is what gets published, that if it isn't published it's not good? In this day and

age of all times, are we not teaching that the work that is written because it must be written is the important work and time is the important judge?

18. GG

If the answers are "yes", and a graduate or two is expected to make some sort of living from this strange craft, then our creative writing degrees - undergraduate and postgraduate - need to be made as powerful as possible.

They should be inclusive of other disciplines - to ensure that many streams of diverse knowledges have the opportunity to come together into the muse-ings that form creative art. There should be cultural theory - not to set limits of acceptability, but to give the insight into why we are who we are, and to demonstrate the many positions and views of society. To show that theory can inform and de-stabilise the concept of writing as "truth". To demonstrate that 'truth' is subjective, and that where one stands changes the view.

An aside here - in a tutorial someone asked what was meant by "positioning". I thought I'd explained rather well, until later in the session I put up an overhead of a painting. The angle of the screen made it difficult for those at the sides to see properly, and one student got up and moved to the centre. She then walked to several different positions in the room, including right up close to the screen so that her shadow blacked most of the projection. "Now I see" she said. "It's the same projection, but it looks different if you stand in different places. And if you get too close you can't see it at all."

There is an argument that writing contains its own theoretical position - but this is not necessarily (or even generally) a conscious inclusion by the writer. It must surely be part of the streams of confluence that merge and emerge in the writing, and not intrude into the narrative, drawing attention to itself like a tree in a desert.

Yes, cultural theory and writing theory, stressing, of course, for the second, that the writing comes before the theory - although theorists may debate this! For how can we be critical of our culture, ourselves and our practice if we don't have the tools. And comparative literature and studies of world literature. Not to write in the style of those being read, as some American institutions teach, but because to read beautiful texts is inspirational - unless of course one feels that it's already been done, so why try! How can the boundaries of writing be pushed and extended if there is no knowledge of what those boundaries are and how they have previously been breached.

I suggest that to isolate writing courses from other disciplines is to return to the 'Romantic' notion of the artist as apart and different. It is to encourage young writers away from involvement in the culture in which they exist and which they critique.

19. IB

But on the other hand the artist is apart and different - I don't mean the whole person but the art-making part of the person, the artist. That's what makes art possible: apartness, difference. Beware also, then, of the notion that art must be subject to the same scrutinies and accountabilities that road-building is ... and that's the danger when, in this sorry age blighted by economic rationalism, art is contained in institutions and grant bodies. I just heard someone on the radio say "what do artists do?" "They oppose."

But that's not what you're talking about is it? You're saying writers need to walk around in all of the world?

20. GG

Yes. Walk around, interact, listen and see. Walk until we are full of what IS, and are still hungry for more. Otherwise, it is an elitist and isolationist stance which can do nothing but weaken from lack of nourishment that which should be innovative and exciting. All that writers have to feed the muse are their own various knowledges and experiences, which form the landscape of the psyche.

Exposure to other arts practice. The actor preparing for a role is not so different from the writer preparing a piece. Art in another discipline can be exciting and stimulating for the writer. For me, visuals are major triggers and often appear in the writing. Other writers have other triggers.

21. IB

Nourishment, I talk about that to students, to nourish the imagination, the intellect; to look at paintings and listen to music - new kinds of music - and converse with strangers and smell strange odours in alien places and hey, you can also do all of that by reading. But who am I to say they're not getting their nourishment from their computer games and their videos and their drugs and their internet?

22. GG

This is all very well. but what about the writer cum teacher cum PhD student. Where is the contemplation time that is so necessary for a work to start percolating? For research to turn into fiction? For the muse to start engaging with the writer?

23. IB

As for one's own writing. Sigh. Well, was it luck or not to live through a moment in history where you were allowed

to imagine that a person without 500 pounds a year and a room of her own would be able to write full time and make a living. In spite of the questions and doubts, I'd rather teach writing than take any other earn-your-living option, and even imagine sometimes that I'd do it even if I didn't need a second profession - it's a gift, that direct line to the young culture of today. But you can't - I can't - write while I'm teaching. While I'm teaching my time and my attention are taken up with teaching, plus reading student work is not like reading Nabokov. I mean, you don't go around with arousing and inspiring sentences echoing in your head. Getting back to my own writing has been put aside for the semester break in the summer. I can get pretty self-pitying when I'm not writing and make melodramatic metaphors like, my writing is my baby crying for me in a room I can't get into. Being a writer is what enables me to teach writing and teaching writing - OK, in the end it enables me to be a writer but not in the beginning, not in the middle, and sometimes I fear I won't make it to the end.

And then, I enrolled to do a PhD. In creative writing: not a creative piece, but an inquiry into and examination of the creation of a novel, and you asked me

23a. GG

Will it change the way you write the novel?

23b. IB

and I immediately said "of course not!" as if "of course not!" were the correct, desirable answer, the precious answer I did not want to change. As if simultaneously examining and articulating how I'm doing it should not change it and if it did it could only be for the worse. And you said

23c. GG

Of course it will!

24. IB

and that still unsettled me, as if I need to think that the novel-writing would exist in a sphere of its own. My research is still in the very earliest of stages but I have found a way to get excited about the parallel text, the story of how a novel is created and questioning - do I have to say problematising? - its origins.

25. GG

So then. How does a writer concurrently teach, write, and research and write a PhD, and somehow keep the quiet place in the head? How, with the shadow of the PhD examiner looming over the page, to allow the confluence that invites the muse, without saying "oh no, that's not what I want. That's right away from the original idea?" How, as IB said, to watch closely your own creative process as you write - so that this also can be articulated and laid out to be examined - not only by the examiner but by one's students? if we examine our own methodology will this detract from the creativity? Will this make the muse-ing process more obvious, more contrived? Will the muse allow herself to be dissected and laid out for all to see?

Inez Baranay's recent book is Sheila Power, Allen and Unwin, she is reading for her PhD and teaches creative writing at Griffith University, Gold Coast.

Glenda Guest has recently moved to Canberra, she is reading for her PhD and is currently the "virtual" creative writing tutor for Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus. Her latest short story will be published in Imago this year.

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