The Creative Writing Teacher's Toolkit

Introduction

Can creative writing be taught? Well, it's an academic question for most of us, because teachers are educating ever-increasing numbers of apprentice creative writers throughout the world. Perhaps a better question is: what are the effective ways of teaching it? Do creative writers need to learn pedagogies that have been tried and tested over time? Do creative writing educators need to learn to teach?

Having been a creative writing teacher who has taught all ages for the last quarter of a century as well as a qualified English teacher, I would argue that creative writers who are not trained teachers could really benefit from learning some pedagogical "basics". This article aims to provide in brief detail some of my thoughts. They should be read critically; most experienced teachers are aware that all teaching advice needs to carry a big warning: if it doesn't work, try something else or adapt the strategies to your own unique situation. In the article, I have tried to provide some important points about teaching and learning, offering first an accessible outline of how we learn, and then showing how this theory might be applied in practice when planning lessons. The second section talks about certain creative writing "staples" – activities that you can use again and again – to nurture effective learning.

Understanding how we learn

Why do creative writing teachers (CWTs) need to know a little about theories of learning? It can be tremendously useful because it gives CWTs a conceptual framework to help shape their lessons. Once you understand the theory, you realise what you were doing right, and why you might be going wrong at times. Outlined below are the three basic ways we learn as human beings; the nomenclature and ideas are based on the wonderful Chris Watkins' research (2011). His *Learning: A Sense-Maker's Guide* is the most accessible explanation of the main learning theories and is well worth reading in its entirety: it is available for free online.

Learning is Being taught (LBT or Being Taught for short)

Most people, including most students, believe that they learn best when they are told information by someone in the "know". As a creative writer, you will constantly encounter this attitude with your students asking you for the "magic recipe" as to how write that great novel, that transcendent poem, that searing autobiography. While you probably do have a great deal of knowledge as to what makes good writing, this knowledge most likely will be "contextual": you need to look at someone's work and figure out, in that unique case, how and why it needs to be improved. My advice would be to damp down expectations regarding you giving your students the "answers". Try to make your workshops interactive so that students are doing activities rather than listening to you talking at length about what you think great writing is. In terms of writers, the Hollywood script-doctor Robert McKee is probably most strikingly 'Learning is Being Taught': his so-called workshops are the "Robert McKee" show: watch some of the videos on his YouTube channel and you'll get the idea. He talks at his audiences for long periods of time, and gives them minimal chances to interact with him or each other. This is not to say that he is not very successful in what he does or offer good advice, it's just that you may not learn deeply during one of his talks.

- Lectures about creative writing craft using presentational resources like PowerPoint.
- Tasks will be imitative and prescriptive, such as write a poem just like the model one provided.
- Students take notes and listen.
- Little chance for discussion.

Learning is individual sense making (LIS or Individual Learning for short)

This is probably how most writers develop their craft and art: they figure out what works by themselves, setting person goals. They make sense of the world by thinking through things for themselves. Many novelists will not discuss their stories with other people because they wish to nurture the spark of the narrative for themselves, thinking through it by being their own audience to begin with. As a CW teacher, to encourage this approach, consider setting guided projects where students can "self-regulate" themselves and set their own personal goals. So, for example, in a class, you might tell everyone that they are going to write a sonnet, and rather than telling them what a sonnet is (a Being Taught approach) you might ask them to research it on the internet, or read an explanation of what sonnets are, and then consider what topics they might write a sonnet about, and then write one, reviewing the effectiveness of their work having written a first draft, and setting goals for improving it.

Typical Individual Learning approaches
- Set individual project-based tasks such as asking students to write stories, poems, life-writing using certain themes or techniques.
- Put the onus on the student to find out information for themselves. Your role is to monitor whether they are doing this or not; you are not primarily there to be the expert "information-giver" but rather more like Virgil is to Dante in the *Inferno*, a friendly guiding hand.
- Make sure the students "self-regulate": they need to set their own goals or milestones, and tick off whether they have met them, reflecting upon what they are learning at each significant stage of the journey.

Learning is building knowledge as part of doing things with others (LBKO or Collaborative Learning for short)

This is a much more sociable approach than the Individual Learning approach, because it views learning as happening when people interact. To encourage this approach, you should get students working in pairs or groups, and ask them to discuss the relevant topic. This is really easy to do, but in the CW classes I have observed some nervous writers are afraid of doing this, feeling that things might get out of control. I wouldn't worry about this. Yes, the atmosphere can be chatty (that's the whole point) but it also frees you up to walk from group to group, listening to what people are saying.

When you think deeply about getting students working together, the permutations are infinite. Back to the sonnet example: you might ask students to write a group sonnet with each person in the group contributing a few lines each, inviting them to discuss their ideas before they write them, and then asking them to perform their poem in front of the class. This always works very well in my experience. One word, or one-line poems, where you ask group members to contribute just a few works can be a very good ice-breaker. It also enables you to gauge the level of the students you are dealing with: their competence, their enthusiasm, their ability to work each other.

- Ask students to discuss what they know about a topic in groups or pairs.
- Get students to use sugar paper or their notebooks and jot down their ideas if you're worried that there's too much chat and not enough writing.
- Use group roles: it is often particularly effective to appoint a group teacher, a scribe (who makes notes), a motivator (who encourages everyone), a questioner (who asks questions to get the discussion going). For more, look at:
  https://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/cooperative/roles.html

Mixing and Matching

In reality, you will probably not be using one of these approaches solely in any given session. You might deploy the Being Taught approach by giving an explanation of what you want your students to learn and why they are learning these things at the beginning of the session; you might utilise Collaborative Learning by getting students to write a group poem; you might then follow this with an Individual Learning exercise by asking students to research a particular poetic form and then write in their form by themselves.

Planning

Once you have a grasp of the various theories of learning, you are in a position to plan your lessons with some confidence.

There are three major questions to answer when planning:

- **What** do you want your students to learn? (content)
- **Why** are they learning these things? (purpose)
- **How** might they learn them? (pedagogy)

Let's return to the example given before of getting your students to learn to write sonnets. You need to think: is this all I want them to learn? Or is there something more? Consider the purpose of the learning: are they learning to write sonnets because you think all poets should know the form, or do you want them to learn about the joy of poetic form?

In which case, you might formulate these learning goals:

Learning goals
I want you to learn about what a sonnet is and to appreciate the ways in which poetic form can be enjoyable to play with, as well as take delight in writing poetry generally.

Learning purposes
You're going to learn about sonnets because writing them yourself will help you appreciate other sonnets, and enjoy writing them for yourself and other people, seeing how poetic form can inspire you to write.

Now, you may disagree with me regarding these goals and purposes, but the point is I have some! I have sat in on too many creative writing lessons where it has not been clear **what** the students are learning about and **why** they are doing so. It needs a little thought because otherwise students can feel adrift, and the lesson lacks momentum. This said, do remember that very narrow learning goals, which some teachers are guilty of, such as you are going to learn about "iambic pentameter" and nothing else, can be very limiting and not very creative (Fleming & Stevens, pp. 105-122)

Activate Prior Knowledge (APK for short)

It is usually very helpful to get students to consider what things they want to learn about – and what they already know. It is vitally important that students are given a chance to "activate prior knowledge" (APK) in the first half of the lesson: significant research into learning (Aubrey, K., & Riley, A. 2016). indicates that we learn much more effectively if we are given a chance to connect what we already know with what you want them to learn about. A way to do this is to have a "starter" which does this. So, for example, you might ask students to do a visual organiser (spider diagram) on what they know about sonnets, and then to share what they know with the class, drawing together the class's collective knowledge by getting them to draw their spider diagram on the whiteboard. There are, of course, many other ways of doing this; you need to choose the strategies that work best for you.

Activities

The main part of the lesson should contain substantial activities or tasks which help the students learn more about the topic. CW teachers are lucky in this respect because it's usually pretty obvious what should be done, such as write a story, poem, script etc, but it may be that you feel you need to break up the activities so that the students move progressively on from one thing to another.

The secret is to devise activities which fit the timescale you've got. By and large, most pupils who are under 14 years of age struggle to write creatively for more then 15-20 minutes. Older students should be encouraged to take breaks to foster their imaginations: your planning should take this into account. Plan so that students write intensively for a while, and then have a short break, and review their work, before moving on to the next task. A typical way to do this is to get students to read out aloud the pieces they are working on. However, it may be that they don't want to do this, in which case a productive thing to do is to ask them to discuss how they feel their work is going on and what they might need to do next to improve it.

Review

This part of the lesson is often left out, but conducting a review is vital if students are going to consolidate their learning. Students need a chance to reflect upon the work they've done, and consider what they have learnt from doing it. A great deal of research (Petty, 2014) shows that even a few minutes of reflection can significantly boost a learner's chance of retaining what they have learnt, and help learners realise they have learnt more than they thought. Strategies for doing this are:

- Get students to discuss what they have learnt;
- Write "exit-tickets" to the lesson on post-it notes and post them on the board as they leave: this can provide invaluable feedback for you;
- Develop a reflective journal which explores their thoughts and feelings about they have learnt.

In action

A lesson plan need not be exhaustive but it can be very helpful. Look at this one I've drawn up for a two-hour workshop on teaching sonnets. Please consider how you might make it even better. There are many other lesson plans for the teaching of creative writing out there. It really is a question of reading them and adapting them for what fits you.

Learning goals

Students should learn what sonnets are, and learn to enjoy playing with poetic form, learning more about iambic pentameter and using rhythm/rhyme effectively if appropriate.

Purposes: To appreciate reading sonnets and develop their own craft as poets.

Starter

Students discuss in pairs what they know about sonnets, and then the class makes a collective spider diagram on the board. (10 mins)

Main activities

Students should skim read this Guardian article on modern sonnets:

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/13/wendy-cope-simon-armitage-andrew-motion-shakespeare-love-sonnets-21st-century

They should then choose two sonnets to annotate, pointing out how the poet has used the form of the sonnet. Report back. (15 minutes)

Students write their own love sonnet about a person, thing or activity they love to do, by first of all:

- Doing some free writing on their topic (see below on this) (5 minutes)
- Reviewing their free writing and picking out lines/phrases they want to use (10 minutes)
- Putting the lines into fourteen lines which are unrhymed. (5 minutes)
- Reading the lines out aloud and attempting to put the lines into iambic pentameter or rhythmical lines if iambic pentameter is not appropriate. (20 minutes)
- Considering whether rhyme is appropriate or not. (10 minutes)
- Re-drafting poem. (15 minutes)
- Performing poems by reading them to each other, and then asking for volunteers to read to the whole group. (20 minutes)

Review

Students write exit tickets outlining what they have learnt. (10 minutes)

Reflect upon your own practice

Teaching CW becomes more enjoyable when you reflect upon your own teaching practice and experiment with different approaches. Getting feedback from students and other colleagues is really important. Doing joint planning with other CW teachers is also very helpful.

Staples

Encourage creative reading

This was something that the Creative Writing A Level (now disbanded) was brilliant at; it got students reading as creative writers, examining other writers' work and learning about their art and craft by considering how and why they wrote what they did. I call this "creative reading" because it is not simply reading for meaning, but reading to gain an insight into creative processes and be inspired. I think it's important to encourage students to be open-ended and imaginative when they read creatively. These questions are typical "creative reading" questions:

What inspires me about this piece of writing? What do I like about it and why? How and why might I write a similar piece of writing? How might I use some of the ideas, literary techniques, feelings etc. here to write my own original piece?

Creative visualisation

Getting your students to shut their eyes and to visualise what they have read or to imagine the place/person/situation they want to write about can be very effective for some students – though not all. It's a good way of breaking up a lesson and bringing an atmosphere of calm if things are getting rowdy (this is usually with younger students!). You can also guide the meditation by getting students to shut their eyes and imagine a place/person/situation you are describing. You could ask students to shut their eyes as you read to them (Amir, 2016).

Free writing

For many CW teachers, this is a classic task which they use to get students into the "flow" of things. It's very simple: you ask the students to write continuously for three to five minutes without stopping. The only rule is that they must write all the time, even if it is "blah, blah, blah". It's a great ice-breaker but can be used at any stage of a lesson and often throws up good bits of writing. Some teachers ask the students to throw away the writing, but I like students to keep it as they might use some of it in exercises later on (Gilbert, p. 95-96).

Uncensored, focused writing

This is an adaptation of free writing. Instead of writing what they want, you provide the topic, but they can write an uncensored way about it, with no one else seeing what they write. So, for example, if you were doing the sonnets lesson, you might ask them to write about sonnets exploring all their thoughts and feelings about them and what they know. A student might write, "I hate sonnets, I don't have a clue, well maybe I know they are something to do with Shakespeare etc…" Get the students to review how they found the process of doing this uncensored writing for a few minutes as well (Gilbert, 2017).

Visual organisers (VO for short)

Requiring learners to devise spider-diagrams, flow charts, tables to help them with their planning or to consider what they know (Activating Prior Knowledge) is very helpful. It really helps if you use visual organisers yourself – many writers do – or show your students what other writers do. The following article contains many visual organisers devised by famous writers such as J.K. Rowling:

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2326630/Notes-diagrams-famous-authors-including-J-K-Rowling-Sylvia-Plath-planned-novels.html

Get students to study some VOs, and reflect upon what works for them and why (Gilbert, 2017, p. 128).

Multi-modal learning

There is a growing awareness now that we learn best when we are exposed to different modes of conveying information: pictures, video, sensory objects, sounds, smells, textures, tastes etc. It is worth considering how you might use short extracts of videos, photographs and objects to stimulate students to write creatively (Gilbert, p. 119: Pahl, 2014).

These approaches work with all ages

Having decades of teaching under my belt, I can now say with some certainty that these approaches work with all ages from the very young to the very elderly! Recently, I have taught many older students who have loved setting their own targets and 'self-regulating', a classic Individual Learning approach. They have also greatly enjoyed Collaborative Learning by working in groups on collective poems, plays and fiction. While young children need to be more guided when they work in groups, they greatly enjoy the experience of writing verse, scripts and stories together. Don't be scared of

adopting these strategies whatever the age of the people you are teaching: explain to your class that they should give them a try and reflect upon what works and doesn't work for them, encouraging them to persist if they initially find Individual and Collaborative Learning difficult.

Conclusions

A confident CWT will have a basic grasp of the relevant learning theories, and will plan their lessons to a certain extent, even if this is simply in their head. Weaker teachers of CW – who are often great writers themselves – tend to turn their workshops into extended lectures or fail to bring clear learning goals or purposes to a session: there is a sense of drift without students fully understanding why they are doing certain exercises. Encouraging students to set their own goals, to build upon what they already know, to figure out what works best for them and to collaborate is the key to successful CW lessons (McCallum, 2012).

Above all, I think CWs really benefit when they co-operate with other writers and teachers, and plan sessions together, or listen to deeply to what other people advise.

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Biography

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