

Creative Writing: Practice and Theory

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ABSTRACT

This research tends to inspect the validation of creative writing as an academic discipline in the university curriculum. To achieve this goal, data was gathered through a number of instruments. Above all a questionnaire was conducted to survey the ideas of a great number of creative writing instructors at the American University. Those universities range in size from small liberal arts colleges to research universities. Beside this chief instrument, the data gathered by the survey was supplemented by observations of a number of workshops, interviews with a few creative writing instructors and students, and comments made by many involved in the teaching of this discipline outside the survey questions.

The focus of the questionnaire is the objectives of writing workshops, the predominant conventions they follow, and their theoretical underpinnings. In such doing, we became able to judge and evaluate fairly some of the adversary views raised always by critics of creative writing. Those critics often cast doubts on its objectives, conventions, traditions, and its theoretical grounds. Due to the findings of this study, it can be argued that like other academic disciplines and in some measures more successfully creative writing has very well established its own autonomy within the academic arena and managed to frustrate most adversary criticism. However, as cited, still there is a chink in the armor of creative writing that is the controversy raised over its theoretical underpinnings. The room for adversaries to hang upon in their criticism of this discipline. Writers and pedagogues are thus invited to overcome such a defect and work together to articulate theory for teaching creative writing.

ملخص

يعتمد هذا البحث لدراسة أهلية مادة الكتابة الإبداعية كمتطلب أساسي في الخطط التدريسية في الكليات الإنسانية. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف تم جمع المعلومات المطلوبة عبر وسائل عديدة، أهمها الاستبيان الذي وزع في العديد من الجامعات الأمريكية، الصغيرة منها والكبيرة التي تعني بتدريس هذه المادة. والهدف الرئيسي من هذا الاستبيان هو التعرف على آراء الاساتذة المختصين حول بعض القضايا المثيرة للجدل التي تخص ورشة الكتابة التي انتشرت ولا تزال بشكل مطرد في مختلف العاهد والجامعات منذ الثلاثينات حتى الآن. إلى جانب الاستبيان، تم تعضيد المعلومات المطلوبة من خلال وسائل أخرى. منها المشاركة الفعلية في العديد من ورش الكتابة وكذلك من خلال إجراء مقابلات مع العديد من الكتاب والمختصين والطلبة أيضا، اضافة الى العديد من الأفكار التي رافقت إجابات المشاركين في الاستفتاء.

يركز الاستفتاء بشكل خاص على أهداف ورش الكتابة الإبداعية والتقاليد والأساليب المتبعة اضافة الى المضامين النظرية لتلك الاطر والأساليب المتبعة. وبعد إتمام عملية جمع المعلومات ودراستها، اصبح بإمكان الباحث الحكم وتقييم بعض الآراء المطروحة التي يثيرها النقد في أحيان كثيرة. وباختصار يثير النقد الشكوك حول الأهداف والتقاليد المتبعة في ورش الكتابة الإبداعية قد وطدت كينونتها بشكل قوي في برامج الجامعات واستطاعت تفنيد الكثير من أنواع النقد السلبي الموجه ضدها والذي رافق تلك الورش منذ قيامها في الجامعات الأمريكية، ورغم ذلك تظل هناك فجوة قائمة يجد فيها النقد متسعا للإدلاء بآراء مضادة لا تخلو من الصحة. وتتركز تلك الآراء حول غياب النظرية الواضحة لتدريس مادة الكتابة الإبداعية، وكما بدا واضحا ان تلك النظرية لا تزال في طور التكوين. لذا كررت هذه الدراسة الدعوة الى المختصين لردم هذه الهوة وذلك بالعمل بشكل جماعي لتوطيد الأطر النظرية الواضحة لتدريس هذه المادة الأساسية في الجامعة.

Creative Writing: Practice and Theory

Introduction:

SINCE 1931, when the first degree in creative writing was awarded at Iowa University, this discipline has grown dramatically in the American university and reached a highest point of recognition during the 1970's. At that time, creative writing in many institutions, became, "*the hottest subject in the English department, and the boom trade of the English biz*" (Burroway 61). During the 1980's the expansion continued. According to Hubber's "Report on the 1986 Survey of English Doctoral Programs in Writing and Literature," four-fifths of all American undergraduate programs offer courses in creative writing, and almost half of this number offer graduate degrees in this, relatively, new discipline (Hubber, 121-76). In the 90's, it remains also a fast growing branch in the constellation of English study. In her book The Complete Guide to Writers Groups Conferences, and Workshops, (1996), Eileen Malone listed more than 307 colleges and universities known for either their creative writing programs or their sponsorship of creative writing seminars or conferences (Malone 154-182). And perhaps this cited number has increased by now.

These programs, graduate and undergraduate, often include fiction, poetry, and drama, and some institutions include non-fiction under the rubric of creative writing. Others include screen and television with playwriting for the stage. Graduate programs offer such degrees as M.A. and M.F.A. Others offer Ph.D. with creative dissertation. Nowadays, it is hard to find an institution without a creative writing program or at least courses, either as a specialization within the English major or as elective or ancillary courses.

Despite the expansion, criticism of all sorts has taken aim at creative writing in the university, and "*backlash against it is always in full blood*" (Burroway, 61). For different reasons, many seem to be looking for defects in the

programs, or deviation from the rules of other areas of English studies. Successful Performance does not seem either to silence criticism or give validation to this discipline. Creative writing as an academic discipline has been described by some as "*the most under-theorized and in that respect the most anachronistic (field) in the entire constellation of English study*" (Katharine Haake, 83). Writers, involved in the teaching, frequently find themselves defending "*what seems to critics to be softer, less rigorous discipline*" (Gayle Eliotte 100), and continue struggling against all attempts to marginalize their discipline relying often on their prevailing performances. However, adversary criticism persists. If not for its popularity and expansion, in many schools critics would probably have called for the elimination of creative writing from the English department.

By and large, critics of creative writing cast doubts on its objectives, traditions, conventions, and its theoretical grounds. Creative writers themselves do not escape censure. They are looked upon as too soft in their approaches and too lenient in their grading, and at best a group of non-conformists who do not demand much in their classes except tell students to "*Be like me*" (Francois Camion, 5). The perception exists students enroll in their workshops for the softness of the discipline and high grades. To bring this perception to the surface, Karl Shapiro mockingly sums up some of those common adversarial views:

*Even athletes could take creative writing,
No books, no tests, best grades guaranteed
No schedule, no syllabus, no curriculum,
No more reading (knowledge has gone elsewhere).*
(Shapiro 27)

In reaction to such criticism, it can be argued that like other academic disciplines, and in some measures more successfully, creative writing has been reaching out beyond traditional English department students, supplying the public with sources of joy, pleasure, amusement, and insights into life,

moral or aesthetic. *"And what makes the situation interesting is the likelihood that creative writing programs exert a more direct influence than any part of the American academy on the nonacademic production, distribution, and consumption of literature"* (Berry, 443). Perhaps this unmistakable popularity which this discipline enjoys has brought about all sorts of criticism, from the amicable to the sarcastic, but enough experience has been collected over the last twenty years to allow for some estimation of the state of creative writing in the university curriculum.

The study at hand was designed basically to examine the validity of the following negative hypotheses that observers might encounter here and there when examining creative writing as a university discipline:

- a. Hypothesis I, the objectives as well as the requirements of creative writing workshops are both ambiguous and confused.
- b. Hypothesis II, its traditions and conventions are not only diverse but also disparate.
- c. Hypothesis III, workshops need more rigor and highly literary reading practices.
- d. Hypothesis IV, the grades are higher and instructors are more lenient than those in other areas of English.
- e. Hypothesis V, there is a lack of a well-articulated basis of evaluation.
- f. Hypothesis VI, the theoretical grounds of the workshops are still in the making.

To evaluate these hypotheses and examine the reality of creative writing teaching, I conducted a survey of creative writing teachers at American universities. This survey brings the objectives, requirements, conventions, and theoretical ground of creative writing workshops into question. My intention, in other words, was to throw these persistent concerns back into debate.

In the light of the findings we may be able to judge fairly creative writing as an academic discipline.

The survey

The survey instrument (See Appendix I) was a five-page questionnaire consisting of 28 short-answer questions, plus one open-ended item that sought unstructured comments related to the theoretical assumptions of creative writing workshops. The first three questions sought information related to the goal students have in mind for attending the workshop, the textbooks used by instructors, (See Appendix II) and what students are required to do in the class.

Eight other questions asked writers to choose among limited alternatives related to the practice of revision and students' response to the various types of feedback, the elements of fiction with which students have the most difficulty, the effect of poorly skilled students on the dynamics of the workshop, the rules of admission, and the effect of deadlines and other factors on creativity.

Nine more questions sought information related mostly to the issue of assessment and evaluation. Among the issues raised by these questions were evaluation and its impact on creativity, the methods of assessment, the number of assessors involved in evaluation, the basis of the final grade, the other supplemental factors in evaluation, the issue of publishability, the standards for success, and students' grades at the workshop. These issues were raised in short statements followed by alternatives for respondents to choose from.

The last part of the questionnaire consists of eight short-answer statements and one open-ended question; all sought information related mainly to the place of theory in the workshop. All but one of these statements asked writers to register their agreement or disagreement with ideas like, "*The process of art can actually be put into theoretical terms,*" "*Critical theories inhibit creativity and must be overlooked,*" "*There is a shared set of conventions that gives the workshop a com-*

mon ground for discussion" and the like. The open-ended question asked writers to identify some of the ideological assumptions of the workshop.

Finally we asked participants to give any comment they felt necessary to accompany their responses. In response to this last request, many made some significant remarks related to different issues raised in the questionnaire. These comments will be also considered in the interpretation of the responses. Together with all this, the collected data will be supplemented by observations of workshops, interviews with some instructors, and students, and other oral comments made by many respondents outside the survey questions.

Many of the issues dealt with in the questionnaire are based on questions raised often by distinguished writers and pedagogues such as Wendy Bishop, Joseph M. Moxley, John Gardner, Francios Camion, Eugene Garber, Jan Ramjerdi, Lynn Domina, Katharine Haake, Gayle Eliotte, Alan Ziegler, Teresa Ambile, John MacDonald, and many more. (The works of all the contributors will be footnoted in the bibliography of this study.) My intention was to throw these persistent concerns back into debate, in an attempt to see whether university creative instructors have come to some sort of consensus in relation to the major issues raised in the hypotheses: namely the objectives of writing workshops, the predominant conventions they follow, and their theoretical underpinnings.

A cover letter accompanied each questionnaire asking writers' cooperation and explaining that the results would be used as a reference and guidelines for future creative writing workshops. Nearly 158 instructors involved in teaching creative writing, chiefly in fiction writing at the university level all over the United States, were addressed. About 2-3 names of the listed faculty at most institutions known for their creative programs were picked and invited to take

part. As a result of persistent correspondence, 54 questionnaires, representing one third of the distributed, were returned. One may assume that this low return took place in part because the distribution began late in April 2000, when most instructors were busy closing off their semester work. It may be that others resent the idea of putting to statistical tests their practices, or perhaps, as is often noted, "*creative writing teacher have been reluctant to articulate pedagogy for the workshop.*" (Gayle Eliotte, 115).

While the return rate was somewhat discouraging, the generous responses of many who did respond have provided much material for analysis. This sample of 54 includes schools ranging in size from small liberal arts colleges to research universities. (See Appendix III). The data gathered in this sample supply a wealth of invaluable information related to the teaching of creative writing at the university. Among the most valuable are those of 46 (eight skipped responding to this question) experienced creative writing instructors detailing ideological assumptions of the workshop; these ideas in specific might serve as grounds for the theory of teaching creative writing which is apparently still in the making. Assuming the importance of these given assumptions, most are quoted directly in the body of this study, only with minor editing.

Discussion of Responses:

The questionnaire begins with a question about the goals instructors assume their students have in mind when joining workshops. It turned out that, in graduate workshops, "*To become professional writers*" as a goal scores higher than the rest, 69.23%. This response rates much lower in undergraduate workshops, only 3.57%. "*To broaden their minds, creativity and imagination*" receives priority over the other goals in primary and intermediate workshops, 78.92%, compared

with only 12.86%, in graduate workshops. *"To become teachers"* scores only 17.94% in the graduate workshop and nil in the undergraduate workshops. *"To improve their communication skills"* receives only 14.28% in undergraduate workshops, and nil at the graduate. An insignificant minority at the undergraduate 3.57% believe that students are there because they think it will be an easy credit. However this goal receives no credit at the graduate level. To sum up, the majority holds *"to become a professional writer"* as the major goal at the graduate workshop, whereas *"to broaden mind and imagination"* rules at the undergraduate.

The next questions cover the requirements of workshops. The results show that the majority of respondents agree on what students are supposed to do during a semester. Most courses require students to write a number of short stories beside revise those works, perform exercises, and critique others' work. The number of stories varies slightly from one workshop to another. However, the fewer the number of stories required, the lengthier they should be. At the graduate level, 74.19% of the respondents require the completion of three stories, while only 25.80% require only two with some minimum applied to the length. At the undergraduate level, the responses vary slightly: about 47.85% ask for three stories, 30.71% ask for two, and 21.42% ask for only one. It is important to note here that, out of the interviews held with some instructors and the comments made by a number of respondents, some prefer to expose their students to a greater number of literary *"skin-toughening"* exercises and continual revision rather than asking them to produce more stories. In general, the majority of graduate workshops require the completion of 3 stories, whereas 2 stories are often required at the undergraduate level. Most writers strictly observe and practice these prevalent standards. These shared standards dismiss any sort of ambiguity and confusion attached by some to the

goals and requirements of the workshop.

In their responses to the questions on revision, instructors also agree. The overwhelming majority of the respondents 81.39% appear willing to read and comment upon not only one draft or two, but as "*many drafts as the student submits.*" A minority of 11.62% comment only on one draft before the final. Others 4.65% of the respondents comment upon only two drafts before the final, and only 2.32% of those respondents accept and comment upon only the final draft. Clearly the predominant tendency is to encourage revision and engage the students in the process, rather than to judge and evaluate only the final product.

This noticeable emphasis on revision is a result of one assumption all instructors embrace. Writing evolves through revision accompanied by useful feedback. This last assumption is borne out by their responses to the issue of feedback. To them, all types of feedback are important, whether the in-class oral feedback, the oral feedback students receive during conference with instructors, or the written feedback that comes from students and instructors. In their responses to the question about the most useful feedback, the majority of writers (56.52% at the graduate workshop and 59.25 at the undergraduate) believe that feedback furnished by instructors is the most useful. Second to this is the feedback coming from classmates, (39.13% at the graduate and 40.74% at the other). This rather high importance given to classmates' feedback signifies the confidence instructors place on workshop members being able to supply insights into the writing of their fellow students, particularly at the graduate level.

The focus on feedback is supported by the fact that instructors observe a broad range of difficulties their students face in generating their stories. The trouble spots vary from one student to another, with "*Realizing the scene*" (24.59%) scoring higher than the rest of the of-

ferred responses. The results are as follows:

<i>Realizing a scene</i>	24.59%
<i>Concepts and plot of story</i>	14.75%
<i>Characterization</i>	16.87%
<i>Point of View</i>	13.11%
<i>Thematic focus</i>	11.47%
<i>Consistency and specificity in evoking time and place</i>	9.83%
<i>Choice of Diction</i>	1.63%
<i>Can't tell</i>	8.19%

On the question of the quality of students, the respondents show some reservations about the open enrollment of students in their workshops. 43.58% of the respondents believe the presence of students who lack the sufficient skills to succeed affects to a noticeable degree the dynamics of classroom. This is seconded by 38.46% who agree that those students affect to a slight degree the dynamics of the workshop. In addition, 7.69% would rather give no place at the workshop at all to poorly skilled students. Only 10.25% of the respondents disagree, saying that poorly skilled students have no effect on workshop dynamics.

The above results suggest that instructors might favor more restrictions upon the enrollment of students in the workshops. This supposition is further supported by their responses to the next statement: "*There must be some ground rules governing students' admission to workshops.*" (96.42%) of the participants at the graduate level register their agreement with this statement. At almost the same rate, the majority of respondents (83.33%) at the undergraduate level support the idea of applying such governing rules. Only 3.57% at the graduate workshop and 16.66% at the undergraduate hold the contrary. Clearly even in the lower division courses, not very many instructors are fa-

vorably disposed toward open admission. This attitude is quite understood and justified as well. In workshops, students are expected to give oral and written feedback and actively participate in the rest of the activities; an engaged student, not merely a passive recipient, is desired. The insistence on quality students may be accounted for when we note that, according to Question 14, a considerable number of instructors (32.35%) at the graduate level and (39.%) at the undergraduate actually engage their students in the evaluating process.

Another point of agreement occurs in investigating the issue of deadlines (Question 10). Though deadlines are unwelcome by many students for different reasons, the majority of respondents (93.61%) strongly agree that deadlines set by instructors must be observed. To this number, deadlines neither create unnecessary pressure on both students and instructors nor halt the development of the semester's work. In addition to this high percentage, 2.12% favor deadlines because they give students another factor of competition. Small wonder then that only (4.25%) hold contrary views. This percentage has an insignificant impact upon the dominant practice.

In the same connection, as some unstructured comments that accompanied the responses reveal, the advocates of deadlines argue that any tardiness, absence, or delay disrupt the schedule designed by the instructor; and thus students must not be given choices but go by the rules of the workshop. What works in support of this tendency of creative writing instructors is the likelihood that all students at the workshop are fully aware that the practice is more important than the product, and their work is always in progress and remains ungraded until the end of the semester. Indeed the practice of having students finish and submit their story manuscripts before they are scheduled to be critiqued--most often a week or so before the discussion day--is followed and observed by most writing instructors.

Question 11 was designed to fish for contradiction, but did not arouse any. The majority (66.66%) of respondents believe that any external factors that force writing regardless of mood facilitate rather than impede the process of creativity. The views of the majority accord with those of Robert Boice who discovered that forced writing tasks may "*lead to the discovery of more creative ideas*" (Boice 477). A minority of respondents, 19.04% felt that those factors might impede creativity, whereas 14.28% believe that those external factors have no impact whatsoever upon creativity.

Question 12 asked whether the expectation of evaluation might affect creativity in any way. It turns out that only 15.15% responded that the expectation of evaluation inhibits creativity. In contrast, the majority of respondents (84.24%) either disagree or strongly disagree with the aforementioned statement. The result may be explained by comments of instructors and observations of workshop classes, which reveal that, in most cases, students are trained not to fear evaluation; they are made aware that their works are always in the process of becoming better, and their final grade is not dependent upon their deficiencies, which are lways expected, but on the highlights.

This above-mentioned practice is reflected in the responses of the participants to Qestion 13. The majority of respondents (63.63%) base their final judgment upon either the progress accomplished by the individual student or upon a selection of the best course works. This open-ended process may help lessen the pressure on students who worry about being evaluated at the time they are creating. However, a sizeable minority, 34.54% choose to consider all the semester work students turn in as the basis of the final grade. This last practice might arouse the following comment. Writing is a process; and if a student makes a reasonable use of nurturing, advice, recommendation, discussion, and fulfilling all the duties required, then he or she is entitled to

earn a good grade. Using all the semester's work can be a valid basis for the final grade, if it is understood as gauging the students' commitment to the course, and does not represent a simple average of grades a student acquires on individual pieces.

This interpretation of the survey results is borne out by observations of practices in a considerable number of workshops. Instructors of creative writing tend to minimize the fear of evaluation in their students. Examination of several evaluated manuscripts shows that most instructors do not assign a letter grade to either the draft or the final version; those same evaluators emphasize that the final grade is chiefly based upon the over-all impression a novice writer leaves on them. Also, in the comments attached to students' writing, for the most part one encounters encouragement and support even to the seemingly unpromising works. The idea is to try to bring the potential that students have to life. Needless to say, many experienced writers in creative writing can see not only what's on the page, but the potential the students have. Many instructors appear more kind than frank, especially when it comes to lower division workshops. "*They are midwiving the craft*" in Richards Ploets' terms (Alan Ziegler 214); and their attitude attempts to foster optimism rather than depression in students. They keep praising the efforts rather than dwelling on the problems.

To our inquiry, in Qestion 14, of the number of assessors involved in the evaluating process, (63.88%) of the respondents at the graduate workshop state that the instructor is the only one involved, and of almost the same percentage (60.86) at the lower level. Contrary to these views, 35.05% at the graduate and 39.13% at the undergraduate, instructors include students in the evaluating process. The results elicited here also reveal little cooperation and consultation among instructors at the same department in the evaluation of student writing. One feels inclined to say here it is true that only the writing instructor as-

signs the final grade, but that grade is a result of many factors, among them the feedback the instructor receives from students and their reaction to the piece in question. In the final analysis it is a combination of all those: the instructor's judgment, students' reaction and feedback, beside the commitment of that individual student during the semester, as evident in the responses to Questions 15 and 16.

Question 15 investigates further the other factors that may affect the assessor's evaluation. Some interesting results stand out. First, (29.26%) admit that subjectivity is always a factor; the writer's experience and background have some bearing in evaluating student's writing. Others (14.63%) believe that students' reaction to the piece being critiqued is a factor to consider, for it more or less represents a sample of ordinary audience reaction. This still leaves a majority of the participants, (56.09%) who believe that other factors including students' progress, participation, contribution, editing and critiquing of others' work, believability, hard work, commitment, and active attendance are all important when assigning the final grade.

The responses to Question 16 reveal that many respondents, in both higher and lower division workshops, use students' conferences, journal responses, reading or research work as a supplemental basis for the course grade. About 79.34% are advocates of such practice, (73.52% at the higher level and 85.17% in primary and intermediate workshops). Only 14.81% at the undergraduate workshop use the work itself as the only object of evaluation, and 26.46% in graduate workshops.

Question 17 sought information related to the predominant method of assessment used by instructors. The results came as follows: in the graduate workshop, 54.28% use criterion-referenced assessment, and somewhat higher at the undergraduate level, 60%. Other respondents tend to give a fairly equal weight to both, norm-referenced assess-

ment and criterion-referenced assessment, 45.28% at the graduate and 40% at the undergraduate. In neither the undergraduate or graduate levels did the majority prefer norm-referenced assessment to criterion-referenced assessment.

The results concerning the most important quality a successful work should have, showed a considerable agreement among respondents. To (74.58%) literary merit, originality, and stylistic consistency are the main features that count. In comparison, (22.64%) believe that a successful work should be able to draw ordinary readers to it. Only 3.77% regard publishability as important in judging the work as successful or not.

Publishability as disregarded here receives some consideration in the responses to Question 19, that seeks information related to whether instructors ask students to submit some of their work to an outside publisher. It turns out that 68.17% of respondents either "*always*~ or "*sometimes*" ask their students to submit their work to publishers. Others prefer not to expose students early to the unpredictable responses of the publishers. Publishers' responses are often disappointing, offending to young unpublished writers, and the rejection they might receive may prove devastating to many of them. The early quest for publication, as some mentioned in their comments, should be left to a student's preferences, and advice should be given only when a student asks.

The responses to Question 20 reveal that the approximate distribution of grades for an average group at a workshop is in the neighborhood of the following: at graduate workshops 60-80% receive A's, 20-40% receive B's and sometimes less than 10% receive C's. At the undergraduate level, 20-40% receive A's, 40-60% receive B's, 20-40% receive C's, and 20-10% receive D's, and sometimes 10% or less receive a failing grade.

THEORY:

The survey examines the issue of the importance of theory to creative writing classes through eight related questions. In this part, writers were asked to register agreements or disagreements with a series of statements regarding theoretical considerations. The first, Question 21, is: "*The process of art can actually be put into theoretical terms.*" 51.16% agree, in addition to 16.27% who strongly agree with this statement. In contrast, 20.93% disagree and 11.62% strongly disagree. Combining results, 67.43%, more than two thirds, believe that one can put the process into theoretical terms, whereas 32.55% hold the opposite view, sticking with idea that the process of art is hard to codify and quantify.

Critical theories do not fare well, nevertheless, in Question 22 asking whether or not instructors should expose their students to the most dominant literary theories. 47.82% of the respondents believe that the instructor should supply only a critical framework and vocabulary, and 28.26% think that it should be left to students' preferences. In addition, 6.97% responded that instructors should "*guard students against infection by theory.*" Clearly, the overwhelming majority (83.05%) do not hold enthusiastic feelings toward critical theories as teaching tools in that only (17.39%) of the respondents have no objection to the idea of exposing students to critical theories. This result may indicate some confusion over what is meant by critical theory. In discursive comments some respondents drew a distinction between modern deconstructionist, feminist, historicist and psychological literary theories, and more traditional and practical theories of story construction.

The attitude toward critical theories ameliorates somehow in the responses to Question 23, proposing that "*literary theory inhibits crea-*

tivity and must be overlooked." 53.48% disagree, and 16.27% strongly disagree with this statement. The apparent contradiction with the results of the previous question may be resolved if we assume that instructors find theory less inhibiting to experienced writers than to beginning students.

Any emphasis on critical theories at the workshop might suggest to students that conformity to theoretical rules would make for successful writing, thereby inhibiting free expression. These mechanically embraced rules would probably intervene largely not only in students' writing but also in their comments on others' work.

In response to a related issue, the agreement among writers at first seems quite striking. 92.85% (66.66% agree and 26.19% strongly agree) agree that *"there is a shared set of definable conventions that gives the workshop a common ground for discussion."* In contrast, only (7.14%) disagree. Yet in responding to parallel question 27, this striking agreement seems to disappear. A slim majority (51.15% to 48.83%) agreed that *"Creative writing instructors do not agree on a definable basis for evaluating students' work"*.

It may be that instructors see a difference between *"a shared set of definable conventions"* and *"a definable basis for evaluating students' work"* Or it may be that, though respondents feel there should be an agreed-upon basis for judgment and discussion, such basis is not easy to define. Uneasiness over the theoretical foundations for creative writing instruction may be further reflected in the responses to Question 29, where the majority (67.76%) agree with the statement that *"there is a need for a set of defined concepts that might be used as a basis for the discussion in workshops."* This ambivalence is further borne out by the response to the following statement: *"The teaching of art varies from writer to writer and each workshop has its own original stamp and tradition,"* with which 95.23% of the respondents

agreed.

With the statement, "*Some aspects of the writing process are difficult to quantify and convey; thus writers should limit their role to advice about professional practices and marketing*," the overwhelming majority 79.06% disagree (41.86% disagree and 37.20% strongly disagree), compared to 20.92% who agree. Some unstructured comments by respondents explain that creative writing instructors believe their role extends far beyond that. Their experience and familiarity with the nuts and bolts of the process, the literary merit, the public taste, the market would enable them to assess accurately and fairly the prospect of students' work; in addition, novice writers need to know where they stand in the judgement of their experienced and published instructors.

Finally, as referred to before, the majority of respondents, who disagree on the basis of evaluation, come to a sense of agreement in their responses to the concluding statement: "*There is a need for a set of defined concepts instructors use as a basis for the discussion at the workshops, (e.g., generic definition, the master narrative)*". (69.04%) agreed with this statement, compared with (30.95%) who disagreed. This suggests that creative writing instructors feel the need for textual boundary definitions, a vocabulary, a set of defined concepts instructors use as a basis for the discussion in workshops, the desire for a firm ground, which might be still in the making. Unfortunately, the fact that the majority feels that such a defined basis for discussion is needed does not tell us whether the respondents think such basis already exists, or whether they think one is yet to be formulated. Whether this or that is true, the need is still recognized by many.

The Ideological Assumptions of the Workshop

In response to Question 25, "*Can you share with us some of the ideological assumptions of the workshop?*" we received a number of dis-

cursive comments. Most of the responses relate to common practices more than to formal theories, though the practices may be seen as arising from unspoken theoretical assumptions about the writing process. In the following section, most of the given comments are quoted directly, except when duplication forbids.

These comments may be separated into four related categories:

A. Writing and revising:

Most respondents emphasize the value of writing exercises and revisions. In this category they give comments such as " *Write a lot,*" " *Writers should turn in work that they have written and revised carefully,*" " *Being encouraged to re-write is the best thing that happens to students,*" " *Work is the operative word--being prolific,*" " *More writing exercises to undergraduates, and more revisions to graduates.*" " *The workshop exists to provide students an environment for working and receiving feedback. Producing is not the aim; practicing is.*" " *Workshop members should write comprehensive comments on stories.*" Many other comments along these same lines were received in the responses.**B.**

The importance of reading:

Like writing, reading has its fair share in writing teachers' assumptions. Many consider reading one of the basic essentials of the workshop, as evident in the following ideas:

" *Read a lot,*" " *Writers can learn from other writers,*" " *Try hard to match the best already done,*" " *Reading and writing always work together,*" " *Students benefit by reading a wide range of writers,*" " *Modeling--learning by examples of good work--is available,*" and " *The most helpful theories are those executed implicitly by other fiction writers.*"

C. Students' Responses and Behavior at the Workshop:

Respondents cite numerous assumptions governing how students

act and respond to classmates' work; the most representative are statements like *"No hostile attack is allowed," "Students respect each other and their work," "Be specific and focused in critique," "Strength are to be discussed first, then problems," "criticism of student work must be textually supportive," "Critiquing depends on offering suggestions for improvements," "People should be allowed and encouraged," "Be honest and frank," "Suspense of political and social commentary," "Assumption of reversal emotional responses," "As an author, take in and don't defend," and "Critique the work, not the writer".*

G. General assumptions:

This category presents more comments considered by writers as part of the ideological assumptions of the workshop: *"Discuss results of reading and writing a lot," "Work expected to be of literary quality," "Showing is better than telling," "Great stories encourage other variations rather than imitation," "Craft-oriented," "Creative writing workshops are the ideal places to take risks," "Details are more important than general statements," "The boundaries of basic story must be protected," "Rules for writing can be broken but not ignored," "There should be some relationship between form and content'," "Form needs not be narrowly defined," "Author controls meaning," "The literary is superior to genre," "The literary is not a genre," "The right story is out there," "Choice of genre does not preclude excellence," "Writers should be granted leeway on choices of subject matter, style," "Students possess the ability to understand (lie basic framework of the narrative and to construct a narrative that works, at least in a basic way," and "Each attempt to write a story is an attempt to create art."*

To sum up, these four categories emphasize the importance of writing practices coupled with reading practices, more than structuralist and poststructuralist theories of literature do. Further, many assump-

tions tend to foster optimism and encourage risk-taking and variation rather than imitation. At the same time, they draw some ground rules for students to observe at the workshop: be deferential. objective and tolerant.

Conclusions

The respondents, who express a considerable sample of opinions of creative writing instructors, seem to agree on several issues raised in this survey at the same time to disagree on others; subsequently some of the hypothetical views forwarded in the introduction are not upheld by the findings of this survey, whereas other hypotheses appear to have some ground.

1. The respondents agree upon the objectives of creative writing instruction which are basically (1)at the graduate level to help students become professional writers, and (2) at the undergraduate level to help broaden mind and imagination. Also they seem to agree on the basic requirements of the workshop: generally the completion of 2-3 stories , beside revisions, exercises, and reading. Undoubtedly the agreement respondents express in relation to the objectives and requirements of creative writing classes contradicts the idea of ambiguity and confusion frequently attached to these concerns by detractors.
2. The traditions and conventions, though diverse due to the nature of art, are in no sense disparate. It is true that the genre the writer admires may exert some influence upon the workshop; however the basic conventions of workshops are always the same: namely writing, revising, coupled with useful feedback, reading and critiquing works, rules of responding to classmates' works, beside encouragement of variation and risk taking. All these conventions are strictly observed and practiced everywhere, and almost all instructors can-

not do without them. Relatively, however, revision and useful feedback often obtain priority over others and thus considered the chief essentials of the workshop. Beside these, there is an equally important convention embraced and practiced by the majority. It is the common tendency of instructors to reduce the inhibitions caused by students being evaluated when creating their stories. To minimize this expected fear, instructors always emphasize the practice more than the product, and thus the final grade is based mostly on the progress accomplished by individual students during the semester rather than upon the average grades students receive on separate works. Furthermore, the majority share another convention that is the consideration they give to other activities carried out by students beside fiction writing. The majority agree that students' conferences with instructors, journal writing, written responses, reading or research work also serve as a supplemental basis for the course grade. To sum up, the prevalence of these conventions in the workshop does give a sense of harmony to creative writing instruction and in turn strongly negates Hypothesis 2 which emphasizes disparity and disproportion.

3. Further, the results of the survey point out that the workshop is no less rigorous in its approach than any other discipline in the academic arena. This idea is quite established through the strict observation of the deadlines and the schedule designed by the writers. In practice the majority enforce deadlines and other factors that urge students to write constantly for they all believe that constant writing promotes creativity. Students are, therefore, required to perform a number of demanding activities, chiefly writing, revising, and critiquing of classmates' work; all these activities are supposed to be carried out within a certain allocated time. Neither tardiness nor delay has place at the workshop. In addition to these major activities,

reading is another demand the workshop puts on students, and it is always essential for the completion of the course. Many creative writing instructors insist that "*Students ought to be compulsive and omnivorous readers all their life*" (MacDonald, 83), in order to be able to well meet the demands of the workshop. In the same connection, there is another trend that signifies rigor rather than softness in the workshop. It is the respondents' disapproval of the open-enrollment, particularly in classes beyond the beginning level; they rigorously call for strict observation of some ground rules governing the admission to the especially more advanced workshop. The reservations expressed here do indicate that the common tendency is not as soft as some might think. To be a successful candidate, a student has to show first evidence of creativity and commitment, and onward to write, revise, critique, read; and above all to learn stoicism in the face of critical commentary.

4. Through the approximate percentages of grades indicated by respondents and the information elicited through unstructured interviews with a great number of students, it is made clear that Hypothesis 4 is likewise groundless. There is no indication whatsoever that grades are higher and instructors are more lenient in the workshop. The grades students receive at the workshop are often in the neighborhood of those received elsewhere in the English department, and in many cases lower than many students expect.
5. In regards to the basis of evaluation, it is true that such a basis has not been very well-established and articulated yet. As the results of the survey revealed, especially of Question 27, there is a serious division among writers in relation to whether or not there is a definable basis for evaluating students' work. Accordingly, one may venture to suggest that there is a need for a single standard to be recognized and adopted by creative writing instructors. In turn, Hy-

pothesis 5 is not completely groundless. This desired single standard may help eliminate subjectivity which many assessors admit that it cannot be completely escaped especially at the absence of a recognized standard. Also this standard, if exists, may encourage more cooperation among the assessors.

6. The results of this survey emphasize also the absence of a set of well-defined concepts instructors use as a basis for the discussion in workshops, in other words a theory for teaching creative writing, which is apparently still in the making and hasn't taken its final shape. This conclusion may encourage many to reiterate the already-initiated call for a firm ground, a textual boundary definitions, recognized and adopted by all. And this sounds more necessary for as Moxley notes "*Without a theory for teaching creative writing, we have no compass to direct or evaluate our activities, no way to understand why some exercises succeed while others fail*" (Moxley, 42). This call doesn't seem far-fetched since most participants believe that the process of arts can actually be put into theoretical terms. And writers themselves are more capable and eligible than others to formulate this wanted theory for creative writing instruction.

To sum up, this humble attempt may help resolve some of the misconceptions held by the adversaries, and might silence to a degree some of the on going criticism of creative writing as an academic discipline, and hopefully give it its fair dues at the university. However the criticism would last for sometime unless writers and pedagogues work together to formulate a well-articulated theory recognized and adopted by all creative writing instructors.

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Appendix I

Questionnaire

The intention of this survey is to identify the most effective means of assessment and feedback used by distinguished instructors of creative writing, as well to highlight the theoretical grounds of the workshop. Your participation will certainly enhance our endeavor to find well-articulated criteria and conventions needed for our future workshop. To avoid misinterpretation of your views, we kindly ask you to indicate first whether your answers relate primarily to workshops at the:

- a. Undergraduate level
- b. Graduate level
- c. Both

1. Most of our students in creative writing take the courses
- a. to become professional writers.
 - b. to become teachers.
 - c. to broaden their minds, imagination and creativity.
 - d. to develop communication skills.
 - e. other

2. Students are required to obtain the following textbooks:
(Please supply title and author).

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.

3. Students are required to turn in
- a. at least 1, 2, 3, short stories.(Please circle one).
 - b. at least 6, 8, 12, or more poems.
 - c. at least one novel.
 - d. one, two novella(s).
 - e. other

4. In revision, instructors are willing to read and comment upon
 - a. only the professional draft.
 - b. one draft before the final version.
 - c. only two drafts before the final versions.
 - d. as many drafts as the student writer pleases.
5. Students respond best to
 - a. the oral feedback given in class by instructors and students.
 - b. the oral feedback given in teacher- student conferences.
 - c. the written feedback on their drafts by instructors.
 - d. the written feedback on their drafts by classmates.
6. The most useful feedback comes from
 - a. classmates/other student writers.
 - b. interested readers, who are not writers.
 - c. the instructor/someone in authority.
7. The majority of students have most difficulty with the
 - a. concepts and plot of story.
 - b. characterization.
 - c. realizing a scene.
 - d. handling point of view.
 - e. consistency and specificity in evoking time and place.
 - f. thematic focus.
 - g. choice of diction.
8. Students who lack sufficient skills to succeed affect classroom dynamics.
 - a. To a noticeable degree.
 - b. To a slight degree.
 - c. Have no effect whatsoever.
 - d. Those students must have no place at the workshop.
9. There must be some ground rules governing students admission to workshops.
 - a. Strongly agree.
 - b. Agree.
 - c. Disagree.
 - d. Strongly disagree.

10. Deadlines set by the instructor
 - a. urge students and instructor to perform on time.
 - b. create unnecessary pressure on both.
 - c. give students another factor of competition.
 - d. halt the development of the semester work.
11. Any other external factors that force writing regardless of mood seem to
 - a. facilitate the process of creativity.
 - b. impede the process of creativity.
 - c. have no impact upon creativity.
12. The very expectation of evaluation inhibits and lowers creativity.
 - a. Strongly agree.
 - b. Agree.
 - c. Disagree.
 - d. Strongly disagree.
13. The basis of the final grade should be
 - a. all the semester work students turn in.
 - b. a selection of the best course work.
 - c. the average of the best and worst works.
 - d. the progress accomplished by the individual student.
14. The number of the assessors involved in the evaluating process is
 - a. the instructor only.
 - b. more than one instructor.
 - c. the instructor and students.
 - d. the students only.
15. The other factors that affect the assessor's evaluation are
 - a. the writer's background and experience.
 - b. the students' reaction.
 - c. the publication preferences and market
 - d. other (specify)

16. Students' conferences, journal writing, written responses, reading or research work also serve as a supplemental basis for the course grade.
- Strongly agree.
 - Agree.
 - Disagree.
 - Strongly disagree.
17. The predominant method of assessment is
- norm-referenced assessment. (in comparison with other students' performances)
 - criterion-referenced assessment. (according to well-articulated standards)
 - to give an equal weight to both.
18. The most important quality a successful work should have is
- literary merit- originality, stylistic consistency.
 - the ability to draw ordinary readers to it.
 - publishability.
 - other(specify)
19. Students are asked to submit some of their work to outside publishers.
- Always.
 - Sometimes.
 - Rarely.
 - Never.
20. The approximate percentage of grades an average group at a workshop might obtain is, (Please circle one in each group letter grade).
- | | | | | |
|----|-----|-----|-----|----------------|
| A. | 80% | 60% | 40% | 20% |
| B. | 80% | 60% | 40% | 20% |
| C. | 80% | 60% | 40% | 20% |
| D. | 50% | 40% | 20% | 10% |
| F. | 30% | 20% | 10% | Less than 10%. |

21. The process of art can actually be put into theoretical terms.
 - a. Strongly agree.
 - b. Agree.
 - c. Disagree.
 - d. Strongly disagree.
22. Critical theories are unfamiliar to novice writers; thus instructors should
 - a. expose students to the most dominant theories.
 - b. supply only a critical framework and vocabulary.
 - c. guard students against infection by theory.
 - d. leave the whole issue to students' preferences.
23. Literary theory inhibits creativity/originality and must be overlooked.
 - a. Strongly agree.
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly disagree.
24. There is a shared set of definable conventions that gives the workshop a common ground for discussion.
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree.
 - c. Disagree.
 - d. Strongly disagree.
25. Can you share with us some of the ideological assumptions of the workshop? Please identify some.
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.

26. The teaching of art varies from writer to writer: each workshop has its own original stamp and tradition.
- Strongly agree.
 - Agree.
 - Disagree.
 - Strongly disagree.
27. Creative writing instructors do not agree on a definable basis for evaluating student work.
- Strongly agree.
 - Agree.
 - Disagree.
 - Strongly disagree.
28. Some aspects of the creative process are difficult to quantify and convey; thus writers should limit their role to advice about professional practices and marketing.
- Strongly agree.
 - Agree.
 - Disagree.
 - Strongly disagree.
29. There is a need for a set of defined concepts instructors use as a basis for the discussion in workshops (e.g. generic definitions, the master narrative, etc.)
- Strongly agree.
 - Agree.
 - Disagree.
 - Strongly disagree.
30. Finally we kindly ask you to supply any commentary you feel necessary to accompany your responses.

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Appendix II (Textbooks)

In their responses to our enquiry about the most prevailing textbooks used at workshops, a few respondents prefer to use course packs of their own design, others use no texts for their workshops believing that student work is the text itself, whereas the majority, however, forwarded the following titles:

Aristotle. *Poetics*

Baxter, Charles. *Burning Down;; the House: Essays on Fiction*.

Bell, Madeline Smartt . *Narrative Design: A Writer 's Guide to Structure*.

Bishop, Wendy. *13 Ways of looking for a Poem*.

Brandt, Dorothea . *Becoming a Writer*.

Burke, Carol and Molly Best Tinsley. *The Creative Process*.

Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction*

Cassill, R. V. ed. *Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*.

Cohen, Richard. *Writer 's Mind Crafting Fiction*.

Ellmann and O'claire. eds. *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*.

Field, *Screenplay*

Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction*.

Goldberg, Nathalie . *Writing Down the Bones*.

Halpeme, D. ed. *The Art of the Tale*.

Hauser and Shepard, eds. *You 've Got to Read This*.

Horton, J. *Writing the character-- Centered Screenplay*

Hugo, Richard. *The Triggering Town*.

Laniott, Anne. *Bird by Bird*

Minot, Stephen. *Three Genres*.

Myers, David Gershom. *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak Memory*

Oates, ed. *Norton Anthology of Contemporary Fiction*.

Oliver. *A Poetry Handbook*.

Smiley, Sam . *Play Writing*

Staniskvsky, K. *An Actor Prepares*.

Stem, Jerome. *Making Shapely Fiction*

Strunk, William and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*.

Wallace and Boissean. *Writing Poems*.

Wood. *Complete Rhyming Dictionary*.

Woodruff, Jay. *A Piece of Work: Five Writers Discuss Their Revisions*.

Appendix III

Mainly this study had taken North Carolina State University in Raleigh as a base from which it moved to include other American universities nationwide. At this university, the conductor of this study, under the supervision and cooperation of his associate Dr. John Kessel, (a professional writer and a well-known creative writing professor), had attended a number of fiction writing workshops, met with students and instructors, of creative writing and had a fair access to students' writings and instructors comments and feedback on their writing. With Kessel's aid and others', it became possible for us to study the same case not only at NCSU but also at other universities. My thanks and gratitude go to all those contributory participants for taking part in all or any of the following activities: responding delicately to the questionnaire, making their workshops and students accessible, and generously forwarding material and ideas essential for the completion of this study. The following is a list of universities of the participants:

1. University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL
2. Auburn University, Auburn, AL.
3. Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.
4. North Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ.
5. University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.
6. University of Denver, Denver, CO.
7. University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL.
8. Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL.
9. University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.
10. Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA.
11. University of Idaho, Moscow, ID.
12. Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.
13. Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS.
14. University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.
15. Northern Michigan University, Marquette, MI.
16. Minnesota State University, Mankato, MN.
17. University of Missouri, Columbia, MO.
18. Northwest Missouri State University, Maryville, MO.
19. Truman University, Kirksville, MO.
20. John Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD.

21. North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC.
22. Duke University, Durham, NC.
23. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.
24. University of North Carolina, Wilmington, NC.
25. University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC.
26. Syracuse University, Utica, NY.
27. Ohio University, Athens~ OH.
28. Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.
29. Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH.
30. University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK.
31. Central State University, Edmond, OL
32. Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA.
33. University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN.
34. University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, TN?
35. Memphis State University, Memphis, TN.
36. University of North Texas, Denton, TX.
37. Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos~ TX.
38. University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.
39. George Mason University, Fairfax, VA.
40. Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA.