

The significance of creative writing workshops for teachers

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Introduction

In order for teachers of English in primary and secondary education to teach creative writing effectively, it is paramount that they position themselves as writers. Even though this might sound like common

sense, in reality some teachers find it difficult because they have not embraced the habit of writing the very genres they expect their students to write in class. Hence, creative writing is something they might teach, on account of curricular requirements, but not necessarily practise on a personal and professional level. This paradox implies that the teaching of creative writing might be perceived as a chore that they have to perform rather than as an activity that they heartily enjoy. Brooks (2007) affirms that “a teacher’s job is to reach students and support their growth. Sometimes that work may involve the teacher sharing a personal experience or passion as a way of cultivating a student’s experiences” (189). In earlier work I describe how I engaged my students in creative writing by producing poems together with them via a shared writing activity (Xerri 2011) and an extension activity (Xerri 2012). Such activities communicate a teacher’s enthusiasm for creative writing and have the potential to make young people perceive it as a democratic process that they too can engage in.

Teachers’ attitudes towards creative writing

A negative attitude on the part of teachers has the potential to impinge on their students’ perception and

enjoyment of creative writing. As a result, further generations of teachers are driven to adopt a negative stance toward creative writing because at school their teachers were not enthusiastic about it. This vicious circle engenders a situation whereby creative writing continues to be considered as an activity that can only be engaged in by a small group of individuals who are born with the ability to write creatively. It helps to entrench the belief that creative writing is difficult to practise and should ideally be tackled only for curricular purposes within the confines of the classroom, rather than used as a vehicle for personal and artistic expression in the world beyond.

One of the reasons for such a problematic situation is that teachers lack adequate support in positioning themselves as creative writers. Gallavan, Bowles and Young (2007) report that “teacher educators voice apprehension about candidates’ abilities, much less their expertise, to model and support writing as forms of expression and reflection essential for learning and schooling as well as working and living” (61). The challenges indicated by teachers include lack of confidence as writers, poor histories as writers, lack of meaningful professional development, and lack of time (Street and Stang 2008). Enabling teachers to develop the necessary knowledge, skills and beliefs to ingrain creative writing as part of their professional identity is crucial if creative writing is to flourish amongst young people. A study by Harward et al. (2014) shows that effective writing teachers “considered the writing process essential and perceived themselves as good writers. These dispositions affected the ways they approached writing in their classroom and scaffolded their students’ writing experiences” (215). The act of engaging in creative writing functions “as a self-

empowering tool to achieve particular social positioning and hence self-esteem" (Zhao 2014: 452). Providing teachers with the opportunity to participate in creative writing workshops as part of pre-service teacher education and continuing professional development is a means of aiding them to step into the role of creative writing teachers with confidence and competence.

Writing workshops within teacher education and development

The writers' workshop was institutionalized at the University of Iowa in 1936, since when creative writing has become widely recognized as a discipline. According to Glover (2010), "It is not a big claim to say that the idea and practices of the writers' workshop (or writers' group) are at the centre of the discipline and its pedagogy" (123). Writing workshops are considered fundamental in enabling those who want to write professionally to acquire the competences needed for such a role. But besides professional writers, writing workshops have the potential to assist primary and secondary school teachers who might be expected to engage students in creative writing activities. The idea that only professional writers can teach creative writing is a mistaken one, as it is based on the belief that creative writing is a special subject with a special set of requirements for those who teach it. Such a belief would make it entirely distinct from all other subjects taught at school. For Thomson (2013), the issue to consider is not whether it is possible to teach creative writing but whether "a published writer is qualified per se to teach creative writing. Unless they are willing to learn how to teach alongside their development as a writer, I think they aren't" (52). By extension, this means that those who teach creative writing to young people in primary and secondary schools but are not professional writers might need support to position themselves as writers.

There is plenty of evidence attesting to the idea that writing workshops have the potential to help teachers develop the competencies and identity of a writer. According to Elbaz-Luwisch (2002), writing workshops constitute "a space not only for thinking aloud and sharing, but also for engaging in inquiry and restorying, a space in which the diversity of voices that enable teachers to express their concerns, hopes, and fears can be heard" (425). The fact that a writing workshop provides teachers with the tools to hone their writing as

well as an audience for their writing is significant, given that "A writer in any rhetorical situation needs to understand the content of her idea, conceptualize her audience, and work through a writing process in order to write effectively" (Magnifico 2010: 181). A writing workshop "challenges educators to reflect on their writer identities and how those might translate into their writing instruction" (Vetter 2011: 195). One way of doing this is by asking teachers "to represent metaphorically what a writer is to them. They could compare that representation with the kind of writer identity they foster through instruction with their students" (Vetter 2011: 195). Enabling them to develop the identity of a writer is significant, given that most writing workshops for teachers are based on the "hypothesis [...] that when teachers embrace the professional identity of writer, their practices as teachers of writing undergo a transformation that enhances the experience of and performance in the writing of their students" (Locke et al. 2011: 273). The fact that students also reap the benefits of teachers participating in a writing workshop is a powerful case for its incorporation in teacher education and development.

By making writing workshops an intrinsic component of teacher education and development, teachers and their students will be able to engage in creative writing activities more effectively. According to Fearn and Farnan (2007), "There is but one reason for professional education in writing: to ensure that the students of our pre-service teachers and those who participate in our professional development write better as a result. Nothing else matters" (27). A writing workshop for pre-service teachers would allow them to "rediscover writing and have multiple experiences as writers to draw upon when they are in the classroom. They need opportunities to write for themselves, to live the same curriculum and experiences they can later use with their own students" (Morgan 2010: 352). For similar reasons, writing workshops might also need to become a staple feature of teacher development. Given the fact that "professional development appears to be more prevalent and influential, it seems imperative to have professional opportunities for teachers to engage in writing themselves" (McCarthy and Ro 2011: 292). Studies show that professional development is cited as being the most influential factor for effective teachers of writing (Harward et al. 2014; Simmerman et al. 2012). Besides boosting their confidence (Locke et al. 2011),

writing workshops as part of professional development also help to change teachers' writing pedagogy. For example, Levitt et al. (2014) describe how, after participating in a yearlong writing workshop, teachers moved away from teaching writing separately from content and from the process approach and "chose to adopt a strong skills-oriented approach to teaching writing, especially with struggling students" (259). It seems clear that writing workshops need to form part of teachers' professional learning both at pre- and in-service levels.

Conclusion

Teachers and young people should not be encouraged to foster the belief that creative writing is something exceptional that can only be engaged in by exceptional individuals. As shown in the case of poetry writing (Xerri 2013a), such a belief has the capacity to deter teachers and students from seeing themselves as capable of writing creatively. If it is deemed desirable that an increasing number of young people have recourse to creative writing as a means of developing their writing ability and discovering an avenue for personal expression, then it is imperative that teachers position themselves as creative practitioners (Xerri 2013b). This is due to the fact that teachers are role models for their students and their enthusiasm (or lack thereof) for creative writing is infectious. Hence, it is necessary to break the vicious circle of teachers who fail to inspire students to enjoy creative writing and who subsequently fail to inspire their own students once some of them embark on a teaching career. This has to start by supporting teachers to develop the required knowledge, skills and beliefs to engage in creative writing.

As discussed above, the incorporation of writing workshops into teacher education and development can play a vital role in delivering support. Besides equipping teachers with the competences required to write creatively, writing workshops have the potential to increase teachers' confidence and help them to develop the belief that creative writing can be engaged in for its intrinsic worth. Just as young people are taught to read fiction, poetry and drama for the sake of personal enrichment, they can also be taught to write such genres for the same purpose. In fact, McVey (2008) maintains that "Writers (and teachers) in education should work to promote both reading and a love of reading, and writing

as pleasure and process, not just a means to an end" (293). Writing workshops are highly significant for teachers as they help them to position themselves creatively, both inside and outside the classroom. Writing workshops can contribute to the growth of a culture of creativity amongst educators and the young people they are tasked with inspiring.

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