Toward Success: A Taxonomy for the Creative Writing Classroom

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Abstract

In the discipline of creative writing, much of the pedagogy focuses on the development of craft, typically via targeted readings and variations on the workshop intended to mimic authentic reader response via peer feedback. What is less clear in the pedagogy is how students are taught to gauge success. Therein lies a fundamental conundrum of creative writing. In the practice of writing, as in other areas of the arts, culturally constructed markers of success tend to be external, lying largely outside of the writer's control: achieving publication, obtaining literary representation, enjoying robust sales and positive reviews. Similar dynamics exist in the classroom: when the instructor is an established creative practitioner, the feedback process can resemble the relationship between a master and an apprentice. As Timothy Mayers puts it: "[a]s much as I might emphasize audience in my written commentary and in my discussions with students, the students themselves tended… to think of *me* as the audience and to try to figure out what I wanted to see in their papers. Although I felt I was making a significant effort in my written commentary on student writing to identify myself as *a* reader, and to indicate that different readers might respond differently, students virtually always thought of me as *the* reader." (2010, p. 100, italics original). Pedagogical attempts to help students develop mechanisms to assess when their work is successful sometimes lapses into a vernacular that suggests that reader response can be controlled and other outcomes achieved. In this chapter, I aim to clarify what success within an academic CW context might look like by means of a pedagogical taxonomy of sorts. Specifically, I use the 1996 study by Greg Light, "How Students

Understand and Learn Creative Writing in Higher Education" as the basis for this construct because it was based an empirical study that sought to identify CW learning outcomes that could be named and measured. One of Light's key findings was that student writers progress through several stages of orientation toward the reader. More specifically, Light identified a growing awareness of what information must be provided, and in what order, so that a story will be comprehensible and accessible. The underlying message is that successful writing originates from a certain mindfulness of the extrinsic and perhaps an aim of completeness in advance of relinquishment. What I propose is not a radical reframing, more a way of refocusing attention and discussing what can be taught and what must be looked at as outcomes, a distinction that I argue has not always been clear within academic CW.

Introduction

Success in creative writing is often framed in terms of publication, or of specific milestones along the pathway toward it: completing a draft of a book-length work, identifying when it is ready for publication, querying agents, obtaining representation, and so on. If it is left unexamined, this situation creates a paradox within the pedagogy of creative writing. Although it may no longer need pointing out that creative writing has existed long enough in the academy to have amassed considerable scholarship, much of it has focused on legitimizing creative writing as a discipline. Arguing that it can be taught, in other words, followed by examinations of how we go about it. Curiously, less has been written and said outside of prevailing social-justice contexts about *what* we are teaching.

Success in the arts is difficult to quantify, at least in an educational setting. Feedback from the instructor is likely to take the form of a grade and ongoing evaluative commentary. But is there such a thing as an objective, reliable means of predicting whether a story will be considered successful, whether it will be enjoyed? Are success and enjoyment even the same thing? Is that not a matter of perspective, of perception? One might argue that success could be the deployment of a certain combination of techniques and grammatical constructions, seasoned with enticing vocabulary. It may also be as simple a question as whether a reader liked the story (or poem, or screenplay) or not. Partly this is a problem because of the disconnect between critical and commercial success. The novels of Stephenie Meyer and E.L. James serve as useful if extreme examples: the *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* novels and their sequels were released to nearly universal critical opprobrium but earned their authors millions. No mechanism exists to anticipate the combined effects of marketing budgets, luck, and the *Zeitgeist*. Even if a key aim of the workshop is to help the student writer develop a sort of internal barometer to anticipate how readers will react, external parties and their responses tend to serve as arbiters of success.

In my view, our institutional defenses of creative writing and their resulting wave of pedagogy-related scholarship have sometimes blurred or elided key distinctions. This question of success is at the core of the problem, and it is easy to stray into the grey area of attempting to render extrinsic matters rooted either in individual taste or in culturally constructed notions of craft (which therefore means they are not absolutes on par with theorems in mathematics) in objective terms. “Who is privileged to speak, and to say what ‘good’ writing is? … [w]hat are the ramifications for gatekeeping in the literary establishment?” Rosalie Morales Kearns asks in “Voice of Authority: Theorizing Creative Writing Pedagogy” (792). In “‘Pure Craft’ Is a Lie,”

Matthew Salesses argues that what we conceive of as writing skill is a cultural construct, not a universal. And in "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," Walter Ong goes even further, challenging the very notion of audience as being a more evanescent concept than we might like to believe. If you agree with Salesses and Ong on these points, and for the most part I do, doesn't that mean we also need a more nuanced view of what success entails? These questions began to interest me during my doctoral studies and have continued since I began teaching creative writing. Having come into this discipline as a largely self-taught practitioner who has also run a small press for a decade, I am attracted to pragmatic approaches. What if there were an *empirical* study that looked at learning outcomes from students on creative writing courses, and what would the implications for pedagogy be? As Douglas Hesse reminds us in "The Place of Creative Writing Studies in Composition," "[creative writing] is largely disinterested in (and occasionally contemptuous of) systematic research on writing and writers, especially empirical studies, trusting instead authors' own accounts, in memoir, essay, or interview, as far more valuable than anything in the guise of 'scholarly article'" (32). Hesse's observation perhaps explains why such studies seem to be few and far between, but at least one, as it turns out, actually has been conducted and was published: Geoff Light, 1996, "How Students Understand and Learn Creative Writing in Higher Education." My purpose herein is to look at what I think that Light's findings mean for our field.

Light frames his discussion of writing pedagogy in terms of its "inherent subjectivism," stating that "[l]iterature was the original, authentic textual result of a private, creative and authentic vision, the situation of its material practice an annoying irrelevance. At the heart of this perspective is the issue of 'literary' quality and the associated issue of innate 'literary' ability ."

The study was designed to identify what can be rendered in objective, measurable terms, and among other things, Light found that student writers pass through a number of discrete stages:

- Releasing (the writing is still very personal, not oriented toward the reader)
- Documenting - limited (the writer displays awareness of the reader but little effort is made to accommodate them)
- Documenting - extended (there is more awareness of form as a means of expressing a narrative)
- Narrating - limited (we begin to see integration of reader awareness into the work but it may still be limited in terms of formal and conventional fluency)
- Narrating - extended (there is more facility with form and convention; the notion of the reader is evident in the work)
- Critiquing (the writer displays the ability to regard one's own work from a critical perspective, including informed dissent from form and convention)

If we accept the idea that such a continuum exists, and if we further accept my framing of the way success tends to be constructed in creative writing, then that leads us to the questions of what lies within a writer's control. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing*, Morley argues "that notions of subjectivity and objectivity in art have long proved unhelpful, but also unattainable" and goes on to point out that the sciences tend to operate more in terms of the theoretical and in "degrees of mathematical significance" (40). He then directs the discussion away from this question altogether in order to focus more on writing as an holistic process rooted in the author's experience and self-awareness. While I do see his point, I don't think the notion

that certain things can be seen as subjective and objective is problematic, hence my interest in the Light study. For example, there seems to be little disagreement that the workshop and other aspects of creative writing pedagogy strive to help writing students develop that ineffable sense of when a story or poem is working... but there is also little consensus on what "working" entails. It's subjective. This suggests Ong has a point about the ontological status of the audience. In that case, is the person giving feedback reaching for a more authoritative-sounding way to say the story is logical, or that he or she simply likes it? It is not enough to rely on peer feedback when the peers are likely to be similarly inexperienced? A single teacher, however well informed, well read, and well intentioned, is still a single reader. However, if we take Light's assertion that reader awareness is a chief learning outcome within creative writing pedagogy, then that points toward an orientation toward the extrinsic. Thus, I will group elements of pedagogy into three overlapping categories: objectively measurable skills, extrinsic matters, and outcomes.

On Objective Matters

What can we actually teach, measure, and observe? In this section, I will discuss four areas: reading, mechanics, critical analysis, and reader orientation. If you have already read the AWP's Recommendations on the Teaching of Creative Writing to Undergraduates, you will have noticed a much longer list. While I agree with those recommendations and have worked to include them in my own teaching practice, I also think that the more objective ones can be collapsed into these broader categories for ease of understanding.

An active, critical reading practice has been a fundamental component of the study of CW in the academy since before the founding of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Norman Foerster, the

director of Iowa's School of Letters during the 1930s, "believed that students studying literature should know something about how literature is made" (qtd. in Mayers 2015, p. 38). A schism emerged between literature and creative writing, and after Foerster's departure, the pioneering CW program was established (Mayers 2015). Writing on how essential a critical reading practice is for writers, Paul Dawson states that "[t]he best way to learn how to write, according to most teachers of Creative Writing, is to read. Students are encouraged to read not merely for literary appreciation, but with the aim of discovering ways to improve their own writing" ("Toward a New Poetics in Creative Writing Pedagogy"). This advice has appeared in every writing manual I have read, every scholarly article on the subject of CW pedagogy. As Sue Roe puts it, "... the study of writing primarily concerns the development of the student's own practice *in the context of* the study of works by successfully established practitioners" (195).

Of course the choice of texts is a matter that warrants careful consideration. Adsit, Kearns, and many others advocate reading as one of the fundamentals for an updated approach to the workshop, perhaps not moving away from canon or discarding it but reimagining it. Morley considers "necessary wildness" a hallmark of creativity and emphasizes its importance in CW (20), but I contend that one needs to read in order to recognize that wildness. Is there a way to forecast what one needs to read, how much, or in what genre(s)? I contend that there is not. This is an individual matter and largely depends on what a person is writing and whom the intended audience is likely to be, as the criteria that define "necessary wildness" are, like talent, likely to be culturally prescribed. Reading also enables a writer to contextualize their work: What else on the market is like it? What has gone before? Ultimately, what matters most here is that reading is not only fundamental but *measurable*. Although it is a lifelong habit that requires commitment,

consistency, and a measure of discipline, it is also possible to introduce students to stories and poems that exemplify specific technical skills in the classroom setting and then assess the extent to which they have engaged with these works. There is nothing intangible or ineffable about determining whether the students did the reading.

Where mechanics -- grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, paragraphing, higher-order organization, and such -- are concerned, the picture becomes more complicated. Myself, I enjoy discussing grammar because I am happy to admit my own bias: I find it interesting. Unlike many Americans of my generation, I was formally taught it in elementary school. But I run the risk of making light of something I consider an educational injustice that spans decades, an issue Betty Azar examines in "Grammar-Based Teaching: A Practitioner's Perspective). One element missing in much of the discussion of CW pedagogy is the harm done to generations of students by de-prioritizing grammar instruction in early childhood education. The so-called "naturalist movement" of language instruction (strongly influenced by the work of Stephen Krashen) held that the formal teaching of grammar to native speakers was unnecessary in a linguistically immersive classroom environment. As Azar points out, this school of thought held sway until well into the 1980s: "...[m]any academics now agree that those in the naturalist movement (most prominently Stephen Krashen) were mistaken in advocating zero grammar" (2). To at least some extent, grammar seems to have returned to the classroom. The challenge, however, is insidious: How many of today's cohort of creative writing instructors grew up under the influence of this "naturalist" language pedagogy? How has that affected the way we regard grammar's place within creative writing pedagogy?

I maintain that it is difficult to have a meaningful discussion about prose or poetry with a student who does not know what the parts of speech are, what parallel structure is, what clauses are, or where and how to end a sentence. In a classroom where most or all of the students are not native speakers of the language of instruction, we may reasonably modify our expectations depending on the level of fluency we are working with and the nature of the course itself. My point remains, however: A weak grasp of sentence structure influences pacing and narrative tension. The resulting prose can also be monotonous and unpleasant to read. A student writer who struggles with the past perfect tense, or who is not familiar with the fine distinction between the two future tenses (will and going-to), will experience foreclosed possibilities in staging action or expressing intention on the page. Discussions of precision in writing will be fairly meaningless without an understanding of word forms. Comma splices are annoying because the resulting sentences are a jumble of loosely connected ideas. In one respect, problems in matters of mechanics may be the easiest to identify and correct because there is so much less room for subjectivity.

Critical analysis is another area where specific aspects of the process can be readily identified, taught, and observed. The history of technique in academic CW is complicated because, as Mary Swander points out in "Duck, Duck, Turkey: Using Encouragement to Structure Workshop Assignments," "originally creative writing was not designed to be taught… Paul Engle developed the workshop as a place where young, polished writers could come for a year or two and have their work critiqued. Engle assumed his graduate students already knew how to write" (167-168). In other words, not only could CW not be taught, or so claimed the mythology, but Iowa's "pedagogy of non-pedagogy" perpetuated and justified its philosophy by choosing writers who did not *have* to be taught. Most CW programs do not have the luxury of accepting writers in

need of nothing more than a polish. In other words, “analyzing the text [is] *the work* of workshop (130, emphasis original). Over time, I have come to believe that it is useful to teach CW students -- even undergraduates -- basic critical terminology because it gives names to literary techniques and deepens their understanding of them; it gives student writers options they might not have otherwise known about, tools they may consider in the creation of new work. This also aids in critical reflection, which requires at least some understanding of technical vocabulary and the concepts behind it. Yes, this means demystifying writing to a certain extent, but here I would like to propose a CW-related version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity: that a deeper understanding of technical terms of writing may enable a writer to pinpoint where things have gone wrong in his or her own work or that of their peers.

Although it is unlikely that any metric exists beyond calendar years to measure life experience, it is perhaps the final of these objective essentials. How much of it students already have matters less than the fact that these amounts can be added to. Katharine Coles recommends “help[ing] the students move beyond content that comes easily. Send or take them on field trips -- to galleries, factories, morgues. Assign them to embark on individualized, miniature reading programmes: three books in a non-literary discipline -- the circus, alchemy, cosmology, jazz, ship building. Have them report in their final portfolios on how their excursions and readings have influenced their work” (18). Admittedly, advocating for students to cultivate a modicum of life experience risks invoking the “write what you know” cliche. I suspect maturity in itself is helpful but comes with no guarantees of thrilling material; I tend to agree with Ken Kesey, who once claimed that “...what you know is usually dull.” If those extra miles on the odometer impute anything, I suspect, it is perspective that matters.

I will conclude this section by pointing out that approaches will vary. In introductory CW courses, Leahy "delay[s] the sharing of student work until students have begun to learn together to read as writers and to use common vocabulary to talk about writing concepts. In addition, [she] require[s] written responses, first to a published text and then to a student text, so that students receive [her] feedback -- [her] own and that of peers -- on their creative work" (72). Mayers cautions us against one pitfall that may be easy to overlook: "As much as I might emphasize audience in my written commentary and in my discussions with students, the students themselves tended (consciously or unconsciously) to think of *me* as the audience and to try to figure out what I wanted to see in their papers. Although I felt I was making a significant effort in my written commentary on student writing to identify myself as *a* reader, and to indicate that different readers might respond differently, **students virtually always thought of me as *the* reader"** ("Poetry, F(r)iction, Drama: The Complex Dynamics of Audience in the Writing Workshop," 100, emphasis original). This is consistent with my experience with students and CW, and it is consistent with Light's findings: academic CW is an ongoing balancing act between being audience-focused while striving to identify skills and techniques that can objectively be observed, taught, and assessed.

On the Extrinsic

Although I do not regard this endeavor as radical, if anything controversial arises from it, it will probably be my stance that certain things we might tend to conceive of as skills cannot be taught. This is because they are not skills, per se: instead, they are matters of taste and preference that reside in the reader, not the writer, which is the thread that connects the different stages of

emerging reader orientation in the Light study. The student writer can hope to develop a sense of what readers will enjoy, and an environment can be created in order to cultivate this perception. However, this brings us back to a ubiquitous criticism of the workshop from within the academy as well as from the trade: that "workshop stories" are risk-averse, overly tidy, too similar to one another in style and execution, and unfairly influenced by privilege. I am choosing to sidestep the question of whether talent may exist in any given writer because it is beside the point. Perhaps talent exists in conjunction with drive, and writers moved to enroll in academic programs unconsciously self-select.

Having said all this, I propose treating craft itself as a subjective, extrinsic construct comprising individual elements that may be more objectively identified. It is also arguably a process of continuous exploration and self-reflection. If we look between the lines of Light's findings, a relevant pattern emerges. To oversimplify, we can begin by calling it something like the woodworking of language or the architecture of story. If we live in a time when, as some writers have claimed, all the stories have been told, then perhaps craft may also be seen as a unique and evocative manifestation of cleverness, or the result of what Paul Collis and Jen Crawford call "fierce listening" in a 2018 paper on story and creative writing in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. To invoke Salesses again, "craft" is a product of culture: which words we are taught to prefer, how we structure stories, how we construe knowledge. And in "Towards a New Poetics in Creative Writing Pedagogy," Paul Dawson extends the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to argue that

> ...craft-based decisions of a writer are always the result (consciously or otherwise) of ideological or *political* choice: the choice to employ social languages and the ideologies they embody in certain ways, and hence the choice to position a literary work in relation to these languages, as an active intervention in the ideological work they perform.
>
> Craft must therefore be conceived as a conscious and deliberate intervention in the social life of a discourse as well as a series of aesthetic decisions regarding the artistic quality of a work.

The common thread in each example I have given here is of the extrinsic. If there can be no absolute, universally agreed-upon measure of the mastery of craft because different cultures will construe it differently over time, because shifts in society will reframe how language choices are perceived, then perhaps the more useful conversation is a whether such a measure is needed at all. Our hypothetical student writer's emerging sense of reader orientation will, of necessity, require awareness of what his or her likely audience will prefer. In any field of study, it stands to reason that some people will have more of an aptitude for it than others. The workshop is intended to help the writer anticipate that.

As I will discuss later, reading is typically put forth as the pedagogical tool by which craft-related standards are established. Comparisons are made -- some openly, others tacitly -- but the underlying premise is that an informed reader will know what good writing looks like. A well-read writer will presumably be capable of making the same judgments about their own

work. However, I believe that this assumption does not allow for the phenomenon of "mirror blindness": the inability to be objective about one's own creative output, at least within the compressed time scales of the academy. To quote Morley again, "some CW students find it difficult to know how 'good' or 'bad' their writing is. The dynamics of workshops, whether in the academy or community, are more used to lending themselves to enablement than discouragement… there is no easy answer to this apart from rigour, and making the right kind of structures so that positive versions of creativity can grow, while also being examined through a critical lens" (82). It is the second half of the quote that concerns me. What, in objective terms, does "rigour" look like? Therein lies the problem, because we keep finding ourselves directed back toward the extrinsic. As Katharine Coles puts it in "The Elephant in the Room," "...[t]he student/critic may address a formal or technical issue, but the subject of each sentence is 'I', and the verb expresses taste in a way that often becomes strangely personal, directed not only at the writing, but through it at the writer's own character" (10).

What to do, then? Acknowledge that these matters are subjective. We can continue attempting to parse the idea of what "works" in a story: some ineffable combination of novelty and familiarity scaffolded with strict but clever internal logic, with flourishes of revelation and insight. Careful foreshadowing; artful reveals. Deployment and subversion of genre conventions. Taking Light's idea of reader awareness into account, craft is at least to some extent the ability to write in a way that attempts to present the reader with an experience that involves some measure of clarity and beauty, and one that strikes a skillful balance between conveying information and withholding it. These *tools* of craft can objectively taught, and mastery of them is relatively easy and straightforward (or at least *possible*) to assess. The extent to which they will resonate with a

given reader, however, is beyond the writer's control. A quick look at the reader reviews on Goodreads or Amazon is all that should be necessary to confirm this, and I will discuss them at length in the next section of this paper.

On Outcomes

No matter where we may live and work, we grew up immersed in and absorbing our cultural views on what success in writing entails; we have been exposed to various mythologies of the writer's life and perhaps imagined some version of it for ourselves. Stories about the dozens or hundreds of queries authors submit before those famous first sales are as apocryphal as they are instructive. Finding an agent can be a similarly fraught endeavor: a writer I know in Los Angeles once told me that after finishing his first novel, he queried every agent in the literary guide he bought, starting in the As and proceeding in alphabetical order, finally getting an acceptance from someone in the Z section. Of necessity, the pedagogy of CW teaches us to look at writing as a process and as a product simultaneously. We can break it down to its component parts and work to teach them -- and to apply that learning to our own creative practice. There are well-identified milestones, such as cultivating a certain stability in the work, for example. As Morley reminds us, "before you submit your writing to a literary magazine, or a book to a publisher, be sure you are completely satisfied that your writing has reached a steady, if not a final, state" (56). As we reflect upon these milestones, it is useful to think about how they prompt the student writer to consider the (extrinsic) reader's interaction with the work. The next logical step in the process is to begin looking at how to get the work in front of readers -- how to publish it. To put it another way, the student writer is being prepared for these specific potential

outcomes of having written. A *process* can be taught. Potential outcomes can be identified, discussed, and prepared for.

The fact that there have been public excoriations of academic CW from popular writers would seem to underscore my point about a lack of clarity around outcomes. According to Mayers, "reactionaries… tend to assert that creative writing programs, by allegedly training too many mediocre writers and providing them with stable employment, clog the literary marketplace… and cut off writing from the 'real world' outside the academy" ("(Re)Figuring the Future: Lore, Creative Writing Studies, and Institutional Histories," 12). As Julia Bell argues in an op-ed article in *The Bookseller*, written in response to tirades from authors Will Self and Hanif Kureshi, it is intellectually dishonest to use financial success as a metric for the efficacy of academic creative writing programs. It may be inferred that critics such as Self and Kurishi subscribe to the Romantic myth of the writer's subject position as inherently beholden to the muse, and of creativity as channeled and/or divinely inspired. After all, if "no one learns anything" from these programs, the stories have to come from somewhere. If this is true, then their argument may be boiled down to scorn at universities for failing to teach superstition. It may further be inferred that these authors' arguments stem less from an ignorance of pedagogy than from a neoliberal assessment of output. If so many students sign up for CW courses, they seem to be arguing, why do so few of them go on to have successful writing careers? More to the point, why study something that cannot then readily be monetized? Of what value is it? But Bell challenges this view quite forcefully: "Since when has the financial status of the author given us any clues as to the literary merit of the work? Kafka's *The Trial* sold 800 copies of its first print run, the publication of *Ulysses* bankrupted Sylvia Beech at Shakespeare and Co, James Baldwin was out

of print for years." Which brings me full circle to my point about success: it is often posited as an extrinsic quality determined by external parties -- gatekeepers -- and by outcomes that can be addressed and (one hopes) prepared for, but perhaps not *taught* in the strictest sense of the term; and detractors latch upon this grey area within the pedagogy and use it as the basis for their critiques. As I begin making my way to the conclusion of this chapter, I want to be clear: I am not repackaging the (in)famous Iowa Writers' Workshop slogan about writing being taught and talent being nurtured. The distinction lies in a certain lack of clarity about what precisely it is that we are teaching.

As writers, unless we choose to self-publish, finding an agent and getting published are largely beyond our control. There are concrete steps we can take, of course: we can write the text, edit and polish to the best of our ability, familiarize ourselves with the etiquette of manuscript submission, conduct market research, and submit according to stated guidelines. After that, there is very little we can do -- apart from cultivating persistence and stamina -- to improve our chances of acceptance. If we accept Salesses's premise about craft, then no objective test exists to gauge how a given agent or publisher will react to the work. One can only research, query, and submit. Moreover, decisions about representation and publication are influenced by factors that have nothing whatsoever to do with the work itself: How many clients does the agent already have, and what type of books are they writing? What else has the publisher accepted recently, and what do they have forthcoming? What are their expectations about what the book's chances of success? Which brings us full circle to the question at the foundation of this endeavor: What constitutes success, exactly -- getting published at all, whether by a small press with limited resources? Or after a bidding war in London or New York, in which a seven-figure advance is

offered? Unless and until we are clear on what constitutes success in creative writing, and these key factors are based on decisions that external industry gatekeepers make, a fundamental conflict exists. To invoke Morley again, "a CW student and a CW department neglect the art and the business of publishing at their peril, for this is where we meet the world" (55).

Conclusion

What of success, then? My intent with this section has been to suggest that matters extrinsic to the writer are not what we are teaching. Fine distinctions abound: we teach the tools of the craft, if not craft per se. We do not teach outcomes, we prepare students to deal with them. Savvy student writers can learn to anticipate the kind of stories that their peers and instructors will like; they can anticipate the questions they will get. This does not necessarily translate into anticipating real-world reception of their work, although it attempts to. Anna Leahy argues that "[t]he workshop allows for talent but decenters passe questions [about whether CW can be taught] through its pedagogical structures" (67). Talent may be seen as subjective but feedback and drive arguably matter more: the question is not whether talent exists but whether we can create an outcome that makes students better, more thoughtful writers whether they are perceived as talented or not. Style, genre, individual patterns of language use, linguistic conventions, and even craft itself are not absolutes across cultures. Writing programs have been endlessly criticized for creating a culture of pandering, so to speak: for producing work that pleases an audience who may or may not have interacted with it deeply, for proactively attempting to ameliorate critique. This aspect of teaching is less about imposing an aesthetic or encouraging student writers to adopt one that might not align with their own voice and preferred form of expression, than it is about helping them understand what craft comprises. If they read widely,

understand grammar and writing conventions, are familiar with technical terms, and learn to offer critique, this body of knowledge and experience will (it is hoped) help them become more successful.

But success in writing does not have to be tied to outcomes. It does not have to involve a contract with a Big Five publisher, representation by a prominent agent, and sales in the millions. Encouraging a writer not to dream would feel unethical to me, bad manners at the very least. However, as with the matters I consider extrinsic to the writing process itself, these outcomes are *events*, not skills that are teachable. Successful pedagogy, in my view, would equip students with the knowledge necessary to pursue publication and/or literary representation should they want those things. It would also entail cultivating a sense of writing as a *practice*, guided by an understanding of industry standards and practices. As Stephanie Vanderslice discusses in her chapter earlier in this book, there has been movement in academic creative writing toward a more pragmatic, industry-facing style of pedagogy (2022). That certainly seems to be true here in the U.K., where I now live and work, and I have seen signs of this shift in American programs. Although I am loath to suggest that we strip all the mystery and artistry out of creative writing, and I am no proponent of boiling it down to a dreary matter of input and stimuli and neurotransmitters, I think there is a certain institutional insecurity that would be well served with a few more studies like Light's. To that end, more clarity around the concrete aspects of what we teach and how those are different from industry-related outcomes would be helpful. But having said all that, I'd like to close with this observation: my own definition of success in these times and market conditions involves staying in print, developing a body of work over time, and writing more or less on my own terms.

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