

Review article on conceptions of creative writing

Gregory Light, 'From the personal to the public: Conceptions of creative writing in higher education', *Higher Education*, Vol 43, No. 2, March 2002.

Gregory Light's article touches upon some of the problems of learning and teaching creative writing as an academic discipline. It highlights the distinction between deeper learning and surface reproduction of knowledge as it relates to creative writing studies. This has interesting implications, as there is a tendency, with creative writing studies, to focus on the finished product (the texts produced by students) rather than on the learning process and the relationship between the two. Light's study is useful for helping me to formulate teaching strategies that bridge that divide.

Light also identifies a possible gap between academic staff expectations and student conceptions of creative writing. Many students regard creative writing as distinct from essay writing because it is more concerned with personal experience and offers the student more freedom of expression. But this conception, Light shows, denies the student the opportunity to work with their material in more complex and original ways. As a teacher of creative writing I think that an understanding of students' general conceptions of creative writing can help me to find ways of achieving specific learning outcomes.

Light's research is based upon interviews with a wide sample of students with varying degrees of expertise in and experience of creative writing. Interviewees were encouraged to give a conceptual account of creative writing, but also to reflect upon their own actual practice of it. The students were from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds and their ages ranged from 19 to 71. His sample of students was, therefore, very diverse. The diversity of the sample, however, did not affect a general uniformity of perceptions and assumptions by students that creative writing was based far more on personal experience than discursive writing and that it offered the student greater creative freedom, liberating them from the strictures and disciplines of other types of academic writing.

The results of the research were that students' conceptions of creative writing were divided into four types – *releasing*, *documenting*, *narrating* and *critiquing*. The first two types of conception are labelled **transcribing** conceptions by Light, and *narrating* and *critiquing* are categorised as **composing** conceptions. Light thinks that a defining feature of these conceptions is reader awareness, which he seems to view as being a sophisticated skill or expertise in manipulating forms and structures specific to each literary genre – in other words an awareness, by the student, that the creative writing text is intended to take place in a social context outside the writer.

In the case of **transcribing** notions, Light found that reader awareness was either very limited or non-existent, with the students conceiving of creative writing as a personal release (psychologically or artistically), an almost cathartic experience wherein an interactive relationship between a reader and the text produced was not a prime consideration. With **composing** conceptions, students exhibited a more complex awareness of the interactive relationship between the reader and the text which they had produced. In critiquing type conceptions the student might knowingly

dissent from the rules of structure (the ability to do this demonstrating their expertise in manipulating it) in order to create something original within his or her chosen genre. This latter would be considered, by those who assess creative writing, to be the very best kind of work within the discipline. One could broadly conclude, therefore, that surface reproduction of learning was exhibited by those students whose conception of creative writing was of the transcribing type and that deeper learning was exhibited by students who conceive of creative writing as composing.

Light compares these findings on student conceptions of creative writing with the findings of research carried out on discursive writing. He argues that there are more similarities between the two kinds of writing than there are differences. This fact has interesting implications for the teaching of creative writing because it means that one can facilitate more effective creative writing from all students (and not just the "talented" ones) by using learning strategies that encourage deeper learning and a more complex conception of what is creative writing.

Light (p. 262) describes student conceptions as being 'activity bound' and cites Hounsell who calls them 'action conceptions'. The challenge for teaching creative writing is to ensure that the activities or writing exercises make it imperative for the students to take into account reader awareness. The creative writing module that I currently teach – a preliminary level module called "Language and Genre" is specifically aimed at encouraging students to become acquainted with the conventional formal requirements of each particular genre. In this way reader awareness is built into the structure of the module. However, students are encouraged, for the first assignment, to write autobiography. In order to develop students' conception of creative writing towards the more complex, rather than seeing it as just offering a means by which they can "release" themselves into the text, I would like to encourage students to exhibit evidence of research as well as personal experience in their creative writing - thus extending their material beyond personal experience to relate their work to the "outside world" or reader. This may prove to be an important teaching strategy for myself as a creative writing teacher because, as Light's study shows those students who see creative writing as being concerned primarily with private worlds of subjective experience do not demonstrate the more complex compositional skills associated with deeper learning.

Light concludes that creative writing and essay writing are not so very different after all, and that the differences are "...differences of degree". However, creative writing, I believe, does differ significantly from discursive writing. While it may be possible in other disciplines to relate student conceptions of writing within the discipline to their actual practise of it, in creative writing studies this is not necessarily the case. A student whose conception of creative writing is that it is a form of release or documenting personal experience without any consideration for a reader, may yet exhibit a complex manipulation of their material because of the sophistication of the material itself. Conversely, a student whose conception is of the narrating or critiquing type may produce work that does not have the "spark" of the work by a student whose conception is of the releasing type. Deeper learning in creative writing seems to embrace all four conceptions - **transcribing** and **composing** are inextricably linked.

Another drawback of Light's study is that, although his sample of students was admirably diverse, he does not state how this diversity affected the findings of the research. For instance, he does not state whether those students who were enrolled on a Masters degree exhibited a more complex awareness of and relationship to their material than, for example, the students from an institute of adult education.

Despite some of the limitations of the study, Light's research has forced me to reflect upon the idea of surface reproduction of knowledge and deeper learning and their relationship to creative writing. I have assumed, up until now, that creative writing differs from other academic disciplines because some students are naturally more able than others who, no matter how hard they work, will never produce sophisticated work. But what is at stake is students' conceptions of the discipline. The study raises the question of what a student actually learns in a creative writing workshop. Reader awareness and technical narrative skills are simply aspects of what constitutes "good practice" in creative writing. The students Light interviewed all stated that personal experience was as essential to creative writing as any other aspect. I would agree with them. After reading Light's study, I am beginning to think that an aspect of the role of being a tutor in creative writing is to create a learning context wherein students can begin to formulate more complex conceptions of the role of personal experience within creative writing, so that this can deepen their skill and expertise in the practice of it.

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