What can academic writers learn from creative writers? Developing guidance and support for lecturers in Higher Education

Maria Antoniou and Jessica Moriarty

University of Brighton, UK; School of Languages, Literature and Communication, Falmer, UK

Writing and publishing are crucial to the development of a successful academic career. However, lecturers typically receive little guidance on this strand of their job. Any support that does exist tends to focus on the technical and practical aspects of scholarly writing. Advice is rarely provided on managing creative and emotional facets—factors that greatly contribute to writing quality and success. This article arises from a conversation between the authors: a Higher Education researcher and a Creative Writing lecturer at the same institution. The core of the article is a personal reflection by Author 2 on teaching Creative Writing to undergraduates. From this experience, we distil a model for supporting the writing of academic staff. We conclude that, whilst creative and academic writing enjoy their own styles and conventions, elements of the writing process are shared. We argue that Creative Writing lecturers hold valuable knowledge on the writing process, which is currently under-utilised in Higher Education.

Keywords: creative writing; academic writing; creativity; professional development

Introduction

While academic writing is different from fiction writing in some important ways (although perhaps the boundaries are fruitfully blurring), there is much that can be learned from the way productive fiction writers go about their business and live out their writerly selves. (Grant and Knowles 2000, 17)

Writing and publishing are increasingly crucial to the development of a successful academic career. The creation of ‘new’ universities in 1992 and the expansion of selective funding for UK higher education (HE) has taken writing and publishing out of the hands of an academic elite and made them a requirement for almost all HE lecturers. But, whilst research-active staff in ‘old’ universities traditionally enjoyed ample time and resources to develop their writing as part of their gradual enculturation into academic life, today’s lecturers rarely experience this luxury (Lee and Boud 2003).

In the past decade, the academic role has become far more complex and its demands have intensified (Phillips 2007). Lecturers must now find time and energy for (research and) writing alongside increased workloads of teaching and administration, and the pastoral support needs of a growing number of students. Many lecturers also have an on-going professional role outside the university, continuing...
their work as, for example, artists, health professionals, and business managers, whilst leading and developing courses in HE.

Not writing is rarely an option. Lecturers must undertake a variety of writing tasks in their daily work, including authoring course materials, drafting assessment feedback, writing reports, meeting notes, and emails. Lecturers are also increasingly called upon to undertake more personal and reflective forms of writing, including as part of professional teaching qualifications such as PGCerts in Learning and Teaching (Stierer 2006). However, many feel that it is the ‘RAE-able’ writing – such as conference papers, funding bids, research reports and journal articles – that tends to impose the most pressures and prompts the greatest anxieties. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) evaluates and financially rewards university departments based on the research ‘outputs’ of academic staff. Although a lecturer’s publications may not reflect their ability as either a teacher or writer (Murray 2001), in the context of the RAE, a lecturer’s scholarly publication record is not only a key indicator of their professional esteem, but also of their financial value to their institution.

Pressure to write is undoubtedly intensified by the widespread assumption that academics are naturally able and willing to write (Moore 2003; Murray 2006). Academic writing is, in public academic discourse, seen as a straightforward, intellectually-driven and logically-ordered process. Hence, traditionally, where guidance and support on academic writing has existed, the focus has been on technical issues, e.g. structuring journal articles, and procedures and protocols for publishing. Little attention has been paid to the more holistic aspects, such as the lecturer-writer’s sense of self and identity, their emotional orientation to their writing and their creative process. Browsing the shelves of our own university library revealed the following texts: Hill (1999), who touches briefly on the complexities of the writing process, but concentrates mainly on the mechanics of producing articles for academic journals; Black et al. (1998) who, although seeming to encourage introspection about one’s own reasons for and processes of writing, mainly discusses the practical aspects of scholarly writing and asserts that: ‘there’s no such thing as writer’s block, only planner’s block’ for which their solution is a detailed plan before ‘proper’ writing commences; Hall (1998), who advises medical professionals on writing, focusing largely on how to structure a research-based article and how to gain access to the academic publishing world.

Only in the last few years, through the work of Rowena Murray, Sarah Moore and others, has there been acknowledgement of the more emotional and personal aspects of writing. For example that, privately, many academics struggle with their writing, that they often cannot find time and space to write, experience fear and anxiety about writing, feel they lack knowledge and expertise, and worry they are ‘not good enough’. Murray (2005) and Murray and Moore (2006) both deal with academic writing in the context of the lecturer-writer’s wider role, and offer advice on handling both the practical and emotional pitfalls of the writing process. However, we feel that their work does not go far enough; that it does not get to the crux of many writing difficulties. Our main contention is that Murray and Moore discuss writing as a professional task, thereby separating the personal and the professional, thus reinforcing the conflict many academics already experience between these aspects of their lives. For example, in responding to academics’ complaints that academic writing demands the suppression of their ‘true’ voices, Murray and Moore
state that academic writing is a ‘game’ for which the rules – including, implicitly, suppressing the voice of your non-academic or personal self – can be learnt (2006, 8).

In our experience, maintaining the notion that academic writing is an intellectual and professional task, rather than one which involves the whole of the writer’s self, leads to difficulty and disenchantment with the writing process and makes many academics resentful at having to write. As creative writers and teachers of creative writing, we observe that creative writers have both a personal and professional orientation to their writing: there is no split. Furthermore, in our experience, writing, of whatever genre, involves all aspects of the self: intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual. Thus, our approach to teaching writing is holistic. We advocate stepping back from the mechanics of writing and inviting writers to examine questions such as: Who am I? What are my values? What are my passions? What is my own experience of the creative process? What does writing mean for me? And only after that: What do I have to say and how do I want to say it? Of course, some academics may be put off by this ‘touchy feely’ approach. (Indeed, Moore and Murray are careful to reassure their audience that ‘we’re not suggesting you tangle yourself in psychotherapeutic babble about writing . . . or become self-indulgent about the processes it requires’ (2006, 11).)

At our institution, we are currently developing guidance and support for lecturers that (a) takes into account the current contexts in which academic writing is produced; and (b) takes a holistic view of writing and the writer. We suggest that adopting a broader approach to academic writing – one which acknowledges the commonality of all writing activity, and sees all writers, whatever their style or genre, as sharing similar concerns and experiences – is the key to developing more satisfactory support for academic writing.

In developing our own model for academic writing development, we draw on our different but complementary experiences as (a) a HE researcher with responsibility for organising a Writing and Publishing Day for new academic staff and with experience of combining creative and academic methods in research and writing (Author 1); and (b) a Creative Writing lecturer at the same university, with an interest in the wider applicability of creative writing and a desire to develop her own academic writing and publishing career (Author 2).

**Academic and creative writing: a false divide – Author 1**

In our view, the customary division of ‘the academic’ and ‘the creative’ is an erroneous one, based on a particular epistemological position rather than on any ‘real’ difference, hierarchy or opposition between the two modes. The split between academic and creative thinking, writing and identity is a relic of Western Enlightenment thought, which unfortunately persists in the twenty-first century university. Rationality, intellect, and logic – the ‘academic’ – are reified, whilst imagination, emotion, and physical and natural rhythms – the ‘creative’ – are denigrated. The split is undoubtedly bolstered by the gendering of each side of the divide, i.e. ‘the academic’ is typically male; ‘the creative’ is female; and by the association of ‘mind’ (clean, controllable, reasoned) to common notions of ‘the academic’ and of ‘body’ (dirty, unruly, irrational) to ideas of ‘the creative’.

Given this epistemological history, it is unsurprising that Creative Writing lecturers and students frequently decry the lowly position that their courses, learning
and teaching approaches, and ‘outputs’ are often ascribed within HE. In many universities, Creative Writing is the ‘poor relation’, seen as a sideline to ‘serious’ academic courses. Creative Writing teaching ‘is not held to be academically respectable’ (Hobsbaum 1992), and creative writing projects, including PhDs, are seen as ‘child’s play’, as not equivalent to ‘proper’ academic work (King 2006).

However, it is not just creative writers who suffer. Maintaining the hierarchical divide between ‘the academic’ and ‘the creative’ is detrimental to all staff and students. Within this dichotomy, academic writing is seen as a purely cerebral endeavour, requiring great intellectual capacity and technical skill. Any difficulty faced by academics with their writing is seen in intellectual terms – writers feel, and are viewed, as not being ‘clever’ enough. However, whilst the main task of academic writing is to present intellectual ideas, the production of academic writing is not solely an intellectual activity. We argue that the problems experienced by academics in their writing are rarely intellectual ones. Rather, the difficulty is with creativity, e.g. not understanding or allowing the natural stages of the creative process (McNiff 1998); or with emotion, e.g. lack of confidence in own abilities; or with practicalities, e.g. not finding time to write. We strongly feel that it is the current HE environment, in both physical and epistemological terms, which creates the greatest problems for academics’ writing.

Many Creative Writing teachers grapple with the challenge of fostering an atmosphere that is creative and emotionally supportive, whilst also teaching technical and discursive skills (Miles 1992). Creative Writing teachers tend to emphasise either one or other side of this divide, e.g. they see the teaching of Creative Writing as being about the teaching of the poetic and creative rather than the technical and discursive (e.g. Abbs 1992); or they feel that Creative Writing must be taught as a craft because, in their view, having self-expression and creativity as a goal leads to ‘the sort of self-indulgent sprawly mess with which all teachers of creative writing are familiar’ (Rogers 1992, 109). We feel that for Creative Writing lecturers and academic colleagues in other disciplines who are concerned with developing their own writing, the challenge is the same: to find a way to validate and encourage creative and experiential ways of knowing/doing, whilst also developing intellectual rigour, analytical excellence, and technical competence.

In this article, we offer a holistic approach to academic writing that draws on Creative Writing pedagogy and integrates ‘the academic’ and ‘the creative’. In the next section, Author 2 reflects on her approach to teaching Creative Writing to undergraduate students. Following, the narrative of Author 2, we draw out the usefulness of her pedagogic practice for guiding academic staff in developing their scholarly writing.

A reflective account of teaching creative writing to undergraduates – Author 2

There remains in circulation a myth that writing can’t be taught. That despite the proliferation of writing courses, creative writing is something esoteric, unpindownable, something inspired by muses and shaped by genius. Bell (2001, xi)

Learning to swim is, for many of us, the first memorable accomplishment in life to give us a real sense of, ‘I did it!’ Writing a piece that one feels proud of can give similar feelings of elation and the process is much the same. Before we can begin to
enjoy swimming, we must take that first step and risk not being very good. Floundering at this early stage is common for most, although a lucky few will take to the water like the proverbial fish. With encouragement (cheers from our parents in the pool and constructive feedback from teachers and peers), sustained practice (lengths at the local baths or regular writing), commitment, passion and sometimes a little bit of luck, we can all evolve from novices into Olympic pros, or at least find a way to enjoy the exercise and the benefits of our ability as swimmers or writers.

In *The Creative Writing Coursebook*, Bell and Magrs (2001) dispel the fable that writing is a gift you are born with and not a skill that can be developed or improved. I have yet to find a student whose work has failed to come on leaps and bounds with sustained commitment and engagement with the process of writing. Even those that display raw talent and confidence in the initial stages of the course find that, with practice, their craft is more honed and their ear more attuned to what they perceive to be ‘good’ writing.

Having discussed the principle that the ability to write is something tangible, I go on to ask my students if they are expecting me to hand them a treasure map that will lead them to the holy grail; how to be a great writer. At this point, I receive a mumbled mix of affirmation, cynicism and hope, which provokes feelings of panic and excitement in me each time. I cannot promise to produce the next Ali Smith or Ian McEwan, as the deservedly prestigious writing department at the University of East Anglia can claim; what I can confirm is that if they are willing to write, read, write, engage with the world around them and, again, write, they will find that their writing skills will improve, their confidence and belief in their ability will increase and their ability to share their opinions and their feedback with their peers will nourish their work. Producing successful stories, poems and plays is paramount to the experience, but what I have discovered, and what continues to please and motivate me, is that many of the students who have taken the Creative Writing Module at the University of Brighton say that, as well as meeting the objectives of the course, they have also been able to take their writing skills and apply them elsewhere. Journalism, essay, letter and report writing, CVs and portfolios are a few of the ways students have transferred their talent, and they can see the potential of their newly discovered writing prowess and how it will continue to nourish their individual development in a variety of ways in the future; academic, vocational and personal.

**The piece process**

In case I have not stressed it enough already, the most important lesson in developing one’s writing is to WRITE. It is vital that students bring examples of their work to every lesson and share their writing with the group. When I present this concept, there tends to be a collective shudder of horror and excitement that remains with some students even in the final workshop. Reading creative work aloud is up there with standing in front of the class naked, (except you’re even more exposed!). There is no point in the experience being tortuous, their confidence will not develop, they will stop trying to write and the process will collapse. It is vital that instead of public flagellation, the experience of sharing work is seen as constructive. At this point, I ask them to free-write in silence for five minutes under the umbrella of, ‘My First Few Days at University’. A simple task as they have spent most of Freshers’ week
telling umpteen would-be and will-never-be friends who they are, what they are, and
giving and responding to criticism is an important part of a writer’s development, and students should feel safe
about sharing their work. However, it is important that they give honest but constructive feedback. As the course progresses, they will learn that repeatedly telling their friends that their work is ‘good’ will not help them to improve, and that they are actually doing them a disservice. On the other hand, hearing someone tell you that your work is ‘crap’ will not inspire you to rework and try again, so it is important that I manage the classes so that people remain respectful and constructive by giving suggestions for development and improvement through the process of editing and re-drafting. I advise anyone who does not feel supported by the group to discuss it with me immediately and, equally, if they do not feel their work is being successfully challenged or developed, they must say so.

Lessons are not to instruct or tell, but to inspire, motivate, and suggest. The module is spread over two semesters, and in that time we discuss ideas of characterisation, plot, poetry, the novel, short stories and a variety of genres, voices and styles. How can a writer find a creative space? How to begin? How do other writers work? I suggest examples and bring in handouts for reading and discussion, but I also ask the students to bring in their own examples of preferred writing in order to ensure that they are engaging with words and ideas, which will colour their own work.

He (the student) suspects the teacher who offers his services knows that magic, and may drop a word about it which will prove and Open Sesame to him . . . In almost every case he will be disappointed . . . I believe that there is such a magic and that it is teachable. (Brande 1934, 22–23)

There is a magic in all of us, I am sure of it. How to tap into the magic is to some extent a personal journey, but I believe that reading and exploring the magic of other writers is essential if we are going to access it. Engaging with the mind is vital in order to produce interesting work. Students often complain that they have no ideas or inspiration outside the exercises in the classroom. I advise them to visit the theatre, watch films, read, read, read; to examine our current cultural climate and constantly challenge their own ideas and beliefs. They have a responsibility as writers to think of their audience and how to keep them attentive – much like the role of a lecturer, picking through cultural and social themes and permeating such ideas with
your own unique experience, observation and feeling is fundamental when striving to produce fresh, exciting and honest work. The challenge is to draw ideas and imagination out and not just simply put ideas in. By examining texts, analysing themes, discussing ideas and critiquing one another’s writing, I hope they will all feel able to unlock their visions and ideas, hopes and fears, realities and fantasies, and share these with an audience.

The seminars are an integral part of the course, but it is important that I provide a forum where they can be inspired and motivated to write in a variety of ways. Guest lecturers make a welcome change and never fail to cause debate and motivate the students, even if they believe that the session has not helped their writing, opening their minds and having an opinion on what was said is helping them to be sure of themselves, their values, how they see the world. We have meditated together, gone to open mic nights and, more recently, the suggestion of an on-line magazine where students can submit their creative work has snowballed into a concrete project that will be up and running for 2006/2007 (Creative Writing pamphlet due for publication February 2008). If a university education is meant to promote deep learning and enable students to arrive at decisions about themselves and their perceptions of the world, then providing students with a creative outlet and supportive forum where they can take risks, improve their confidence and find a unique voice or imprint that will infiltrate the rest of their written work is fundamental for personal development and will furnish students with a variety of skills that they can take forward and build on post-higher education.

Writing isn’t about making money, getting famous, getting dates, getting laid or making friends. In the end, it’s about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own life as well. It’s about getting up, getting well and getting over. Getting happy, okay? Getting happy … Life isn’t a support system for art. It’s the other way round. (King 2000, 326)

The course is now at the end of its second year, and it is not perfect. There are days when I feel as if I have learnt a lot more than the students, and for all the wrong reasons! The feedback continues to be positive, the writing continues to improve and I continue to be delighted by the passion, talent and creativity that the students exude. Their ability to take chances and share their work responsibly and compassionately with one another is at times overwhelming and at times bewildering, but we continue to grow and develop together.

It is with this in mind that I have started to imagine how to apply the ethos of what I am trying to achieve in the classroom to workshops and training sessions that seek to develop the writing skills and confidence of other members of the university. From lecturers to caretakers, estates managers to technicians, student union officers to counselors, could a creative writing course be adapted to ignite self-belief and inspire a new found skill, or rediscover an old one? By creating a respectful and nurturing learning environment where people feel able to take a risk by sharing their work with others and trust others to give constructive feedback and support, I hope to build learning groups that will support and encourage one another to develop their writing albeit for professional or personal use. Students who take the Creative Writing option may not go on to be the next best-selling author, but they will be better, more confident writers who have found their own style and voice, and who are
able to insert their own DNA and fingerprints into all their written work. They will also have learnt that their commitment to the process of writing can improve their ability to give and receive feedback, and use this valuable communication tool to become even better learners and writers. This possibility is accessible not just to students but also to anyone willing to engage with the process and increase their passion for writing. This year, as well as developing the creative writing module for students, I feel committed to expanding the ideas the course seeks to explore, and transfusing them throughout the university; to get a discourse going on the values of creative writing and building a diverse learning community. To get people sharing ideas on life and art and society and empowering them with the tools to infiltrate their work with their insight and experience and take on life.

Towards a holistic model for developing academic writing – Author 1

We acknowledge the undesirability of applying a pedagogic model for teaching undergraduates to the development academic staff. However, we do identify certain principles from the practice of Author 2, which can be used to guide and support HE lecturers in their writing. Author 2 aims at an interactive and egalitarian approach in her teaching which, as far as possible, dissolves hierarchical relationships between lecturer and students, respects students’ existing knowledge and experience, and empowers students to take charge of their own learning. In her experience, this approach transfers easily into other educational settings including, we envisage, academic writing workshops with HE lecturers. The main transferable principles we identify from the pedagogic practice of Author 2 are discussed below.

Writing is a skill that can be taught

We strongly believe that successful academic writing does not depend on innate talent and ability but, like all writing, develops with dedication and practice. Academics who appear to be ‘natural’ and prolific scholarly writers have often built their writing career over decades, beginning at school, and gradually developing their ability to express intellectual ideas in a logical and ordered way. We suspect these colleagues have also enjoyed ideal conditions for the development of their writing, e.g. an intellectually stimulating environment and a high level of recognition and support for their work from educators and peers (see below). For other academic colleagues, the opportunities to practice scholarly writing, or to receive feedback and support, have probably not been available to the same extent. This may be especially true for lecturers who have entered HE from professional and vocational areas, e.g. nursing, catering, business, rather than following a conventional academic trajectory, e.g. BA, MA, PhD.

The writing histories and autobiographies of academics is an area that could benefit from research, and we are keen to examine this further. However, for the purposes of this article, we want to demystify academic writing and to encourage the view that anyone can write academically, given practice, guidance and support. We see this as the basic tenet of any academic writing development initiative and certainly as the basis of our endeavors within our institution.
Building confidence and establishing safety

Writing involves emotional risk-taking. To write (for publication) is to make oneself visible, to expose one’s ideas and identity to public scrutiny. The account by Author 2 articulated the horror Creative Writing students typically feel when asked to share their work with the group. From informal discussions with colleagues, we know that academic writers can also feel this horror at publicizing their work, but that their fear is rarely expressed. Academia tends to be a competitive and individualist environment, where highlighting one’s own anxieties and vulnerabilities can undermine professional status and success. Academics would rather struggle in silence than admit they need help with their writing.

In running writing groups for academics, Lee and Boud (2003) found that they offered a space where vulnerability and other psychological issues could be voiced: ‘Academic writing was a touchstone for the surfacing of many major questions concerning identity and change. Issues of fear and desire worked together to impact often dramatically on images of personal competence’ (197). Writing development initiatives need to feel emotionally safe for participants. Colleagues who lead such projects, whilst having the knowledge and experience to appear credible, must beware of presenting themselves as ‘experts’, with no anxieties of their own. Academic staff must feel free to express fears of ‘not being good enough’ without negative consequences. Confidence should then be built through exercises and activities which are non-intimidating, which encourage exploration and play, and which allow participants to track their progress.

Successful writing requires community

There is a popular conception of the writer as an isolated individual, scribbling in a lonely garret (Grant and Knowles 2000). However, most writers work within a community. Writing is a social act – involving relationships between writers and readers. Successful writing depends on sharing work with peers at all stages of the process and on receiving feedback. Courses, workshops, retreats, real-life and Internet-based writing groups offer this kind of support for creative writers. However, academic writers have comparably few spaces for sharing writing-in-progress. Academic writing, even when presented in its formative stages as conference papers, is always required to appear polished, and is rarely seen by others in a raw and rambling state.

We applaud initiatives we have come across which seek to create a sense of writing-in-community for academic staff, e.g. Grant and Knowles’ (2000) projects for academic women writers: a five-day writing retreat and workplace writing groups. The benefits of both initiatives included participants’ realisation that their problems were shared by others, gaining information on writing and publishing, and gaining feedback on work.

Moore (2003) also recommends writing retreats for academics: ‘Instead of a solitary, isolated, solely competitive activity, it is more useful to approach it [academic writing] as a community-based, collaborative, social act... People who write as part of a community of writers are more likely to learn faster about the conventions and challenges of writing and to support each other at times of blockage and to demystify the process of writing by sharing each others’ successes and failures’ (334). The five-day writer’s retreat she ran at the University of Limerick embodied
these principles. Participants reported that writing at the retreat was ‘more pleasurable, motivating and productive’ than writing in everyday life (338), largely because ‘the establishment of a collaborative community of writers; the legitimisation of space and time for writing; physical and psychological safety of the working environment; invoked sense of engagement and “flow”; opportunities for relaxation in the context of hard work’ (338).

Lee and Boud (2003) chose to locate writing groups within the university rather than at a retreat because they favoured ongoing ‘peer learning’ within the usual working environment. In their view, normal business is one of the fundamental principles for successful academic writing groups. Writing development needs to be built into the daily work of the organisation, fitting in with the timetable. Writing needs to be established as a routine in academics’ daily life. Lee and Boud’s other principles are: Mutuality – ‘the achievement of a rich peer relationship involves recognition both of a common positionality, in some fundamental sense, and a common project’ (194); and attending to issues of identity and desire. Emotions – including fears and desires – play a huge role in shaping academic identities and academic practice, but are rarely explicitly acknowledged in academic life.

Conclusion: towards more effective support for academic writing

In our experience, writing – in whatever style or genre – is an emotional and identity-related activity, as well as a technical, craft-based one. Writing is intricately linked to a sense of Self (personal and professional), and is a way of expressing that Self. Therefore, writing cannot only be taught in technical terms. Any support and guidance for academic writing must address personal experience and emotional processes. ‘That is, any change strategy needs to be mindful of how fears can be managed and desires developed productively’ (Lee and Boud 2003, 190).

We acknowledge that not all academics share the same writing concerns or needs, so any initiatives need to be carefully planned to either address broad-ranging issues for a varied group of staff or targeted to the requirements of a particular academic group. Grant and Knowles (2000) suggest writing groups could be set up for different discipline areas and people who share same identity categories in HE. Lee and Boud (2003) point out that there is no wrong or right way for writing groups to function and there will be variation in local contexts. Perhaps the very fact that an initiative exists is more important than its format: Moore (2003), speaking about the University of Limerick retreat, states ‘Providing a pleasant, relaxing, secluded and even luxurious environment sent the message to participants that writing was important and that their university was prepared to provide resources in order to support it’ (341).

To help academics write, we need to (a) initiate discussions and undertake research in order to understand the nature of academic writing (b) design interventions guided by this understanding (Moore 2003). In this article, we have articulated our own views on the nature of academic writing. Since writing the bulk of this piece, we have been approached, or have volunteered to develop and lead academic writing workshops and retreats for academic staff at our institution. We would like to end this article by emphasising that Creative Writing lecturers are an invaluable resource in helping to develop academic writing. Creative writers hold knowledge and experience about the writing process which could benefit academics
immensely, including how to make time and space for writing within a busy life, how to deal with ‘blocks’, how to give and receive feedback. However, creative writing lecturers have their own pressures and priorities and are unlikely to want to participate if they are viewed only as a ‘resource’, without benefit to themselves, e.g. helping to develop their own career or furthering their understanding of writing.

References
