



Creative Writing Studies: The Past Decade (and the Next)

Tim Mayers

Department of English, Millersville University

timothy.mayers@millersville.edu

SOMETHING CALLED “CREATIVE WRITING STUDIES” HAS ARRIVED ON THE ACADEMIC SCENE.

We can argue about *what* exactly Creative Writing Studies is, and *when* exactly it arrived—and I will do a bit of both later in this essay—but it is worth pausing for a moment to note that the creation of this new journal, the one for which I am now writing, marks an important milestone in the development of Creative Writing Studies, whatever it has been and whatever it may yet become. The felt need for a scholarly forum such as this indicates that some kind of crossroads has been reached.

We might ask: *Is Creative Writing Studies an academic discipline?* My immediate answer to that question would be *no*, or perhaps, more tentatively, *not yet*. At this point in time, Creative Writing Studies has *some* of the trappings of a full-fledged academic discipline, but not others. There are scholarly publications, certainly, and extensive discussions in online social networks, and—perhaps most importantly—people who identify professionally with the term *Creative Writing Studies*. In these ways, Creative Writing Studies has arrived at certain disciplinary benchmarks—one of which may be that the number of publications is becoming a challenge for any interested individual to “keep current” with.

In other ways, though, Creative Writing Studies has not yet arrived at full-scale disciplinarity. There are no degree programs specifically in Creative Writing Studies, either at the undergraduate or graduate levels (though there are degree programs, almost always within English departments, where Creative Writing Studies work can be done, sometimes with significant difficulty and resistance). There may not be many more than a small handful of individual Creative Writing Studies courses either (at least not by that name). Those who work actively in Creative Writing Studies have had to operate most often within the institutional structures of more established subfields of English studies. A sizeable number of Creative Writing Studies scholars and practitioners have come through traditional, workshop-based programs in creative writing; a significant number of others (like me) have come through doctoral programs in composition and rhetoric; a smaller number have worked their way through programs in literary studies; and most current scholars and practitioners are likely to have worked in more than one of these subfields. Such subdisciplinary “crossovers” may have been necessitated, at least in part, by the reality that certain ways of approaching or investigating writing are not or were not available in traditional creative writing programs, or were not valued or welcomed there.

Creative Writing Studies, at this current moment, is probably best characterized not as a “discipline,” but rather as a “field” in the sense articulated by composition scholar Byron Hawk: “A discipline is an administrative category based on departments and institutional hierarchies. . . . A field is a cluster of issues, texts, theorists, and practitioners on a plane of immanence—on a flat, nonhierarchical surface” (275n1). In the final section of *Establishing Creative Writing Studies as an Academic Discipline*, entitled “The Academic Home of *Creative Writing Studies*,” Dianne Donnelly addresses the question of where, in the academy, Creative Writing Studies might *belong*, exploring the pros and cons of establishing a (disciplinary) home base within the different subfields of English studies, or within independent writing programs or departments, or attempting to create departmental structures all its own. She ultimately concludes (and I agree with her) that for Creative Writing Studies at this historical moment, “its conceptual space is more critical than its physical space” (147).

I will take no firm position at this point on whether or not Creative Writing Studies should actively seek distinct institutional/disciplinary status via its own degree programs and/or stand-alone departments. Two powerful factors would make such a goal difficult to achieve any time soon. First, such changes in the academy tend to occur at a glacial pace; young academics who committed themselves to such a goal might well retire by the time they see it fully realized. Second, the current financial and ideological climate within higher education seems to foster contraction and consolidation—not expansion and fragmentation—of academic programs, especially in the humanities. Creative Writing Studies, then, will likely have to make its presence known more in conceptual than physical spaces, to borrow Donnelly’s phrasing again. But developments in conceptual space might lead, in ways very difficult to predict, to eventual changes in physical space.

In terms of this conceptual space, Creative Writing Studies has arrived in force over the past decade, though it certainly has roots that stretch back further. 2005, arguably, is when Creative Writing Studies began picking up some serious momentum. Before that, work in Creative Writing Studies (which then usually did not go by such a name) tended to appear only sporadically. There were landmark works, no doubt, but they tended to appear in isolation, without a lively enough ongoing conversation to keep them in dialogue with each other: Joseph Moxley’s *Creative Writing in America*, Wendy Bishop’s *Released into Language*, Patrick Bizzaro’s *Responding to Student Poems*, D.G. Myers’s *The Elephants Teach*, Katharine Haake’s *What Our Speech Disrupts* (which, to the best of my knowledge, is the work that first used the term “Creative Writing Studies” in the United States). But the year 2005 marked the publication of three books that may have signaled a significant change in the conceptual space of Creative Writing Studies, a change that was not immediately obvious but seems clearer now. Two of those books sought to situate creative writing within larger institutional contexts; both books also advocated a bold, assertive, and integrationist identity for creative writing in the academy. The third book marked the publication of the first volume in a series that would become increasingly important for creative writing studies over the ensuing decade. My *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies* mapped out some of creative writing’s possible points of intersection with composition studies in the U.S., and advocated collaborations

between the two subfields with an eye toward disrupting and challenging the central role that interpretive literary study has played within English studies. Paul Dawson's *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, situated in an Australian context, argued for creative writing as a mediating force between traditional humanist literary study, cultural studies, and more (allegedly) utilitarian forms of writing instruction. Dawson's articulation of—and advocacy for—a “sociological poetics” (205 – 214) sought to place creative writing in a central and influential role in twenty-first century humanities education. Anna Leahy's edited collection, *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project*, launched the New Writing Viewpoints book series, published by Multilingual Matters. This series has become an important forum for scholars in Creative Writing Studies, with eleven volumes published thus far after Leahy's.

Two edited collections published in 2015 illustrate, in my view, just how far Creative Writing Studies has come over the past decade, and where it might go in the near future. *Creative Writing Pedagogies for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alexandria Peary and Tom C. Hunley, outlines twelve distinct and innovative pedagogies already being used in creative writing classrooms and advocates their further use and exploration and cross-pollination. This book paints a picture of a creative writing that—at least in some current classrooms and programs—has distinctively expanded beyond the traditional workshop pedagogy that focuses on late-stage revision and editing of individual student work. *Creative Writing in the Digital Age: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy*, edited by Michael Dean Clark, Trent Hergenrader, and Joseph Rein, actively challenges, on a number of fronts, the ways in which academic creative writing has clung to an (often) unconscious and unexamined valorization of the technology of print and the notions of human selfhood that tend to accompany it. The emergence of digital spaces for text production and distribution has the tendency also to disrupt traditional notions about genre and about what constitutes “the literary,” notions which creative writing's current disciplinary association, the AWP, often seems unwilling to question.

What, then, should be the short-term goals for those of us who identify with the term *Creative Writing Studies*? What should we be trying to do? Our courses of action, I will argue, should occur on (at least) two fronts: our own academic places of work, and the larger world of professional organizations in English studies. The underlying purposes of these goals are twofold: first, to continue the development of Creative Writing Studies as an intellectual field in its own right, and second, to employ Creative Writing Studies as a disruptive and innovative force within English studies, creating a transformed vision and version of the larger field.

In our own places of work (at least for those of us who are allowed a voice in pedagogical and curricular matters), we should be advocating the value of creative writing for students, and attempting to incorporate it more fully into our curricula, especially the curricula for undergraduate English majors. Creative writing originally gained a foothold in academia at the graduate level, with the early MFA programs at Iowa and elsewhere. And because admission to these programs was often—and still is—very competitive, the field has developed a strong focus on student writers deemed already “capable” or even “gifted.” Even at the undergraduate level, it is common for students to have to

petition for admission to creative writing courses, often having to submit a portfolio of work before the term begins so that the instructor can judge if the students are worthy or not. Creative Writing Studies should challenge this institutional dynamic, advocating for creative writing as a fundamental requirement for all English majors, and encouraging professors of literature and composition to incorporate creative writing into their own courses. Proponents of Creative Writing Studies should also advocate the interdisciplinary value of creative writing within college and university general education curricula as well as within coursework for other fields and disciplines.

Proponents of Creative Writing Studies should also announce the presence and assert the value of our field within the contexts of three major professional organizations in English studies: the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), and the Modern Language Association (MLA). A separate professional organization for Creative Writing Studies may be necessary in the near term (and the formation of this journal may be a first step in that direction), but it remains to be seen whether or not this is a long-term necessity; an alternate possibility is that Creative Writing Studies might exert a large enough influence on the field of English studies to become, effectively, woven into the fabrics of literary studies, composition studies, and (transformatively) creative writing itself.

The AWP, on the surface, looks like the most obvious and inviting organizational home for Creative Writing Studies. Yet it has proven—at least in the eyes of those who founded this journal, and many others—to be usually indifferent, and at times even hostile, to Creative Writing Studies. AWP's recent name change, from the Associated Writing Programs to the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, suggests an organizational priority: the individual writer is more important to AWP than the practice or subject of writing itself. Writing matters, in other words, because writers do it.

A careful perusal of AWP's list of accepted events for its 2016 convention demonstrates a strong organizational preference for what might be called an *epistemology of individual experience*. In other words, questions that arise about writing are thought to be best answered via recourse to the experiences of individuals, with preference given to the experience of established writers. For example, a question about the tension between intention and intuition is addressed by having individual writers explain how *they* experienced that relationship during the composition of particular works. This pattern recurs throughout most of AWP's accepted events. Evidence for what we know about writing takes such forms as: Here's what happened when *I* published my book; Here's how *I* faced the challenge of writing a book-length poem; Here was *my* experience applying to, or working my way through, an MFA program; Here's the story of *my* search for a tenure-track job in creative writing; Here's what happened when *I* tried to establish a reading series at my college; etc.

This is not to discount the value of individual experience as a source or form of knowledge about writing. But individual experience is only *one* source of knowledge, one that at times can have serious limitations. For instance, one panel presentation I attended at the 2013 AWP Conference in Boston featured three recent MFA graduates discussing their experiences (and significant difficulties) teaching required first-year college composition as non-tenure track instructors. They all seemed genuinely

dedicated to their jobs (in spite of the low status and pay of their contingent appointments) and genuinely willing to discuss their situations with others—both to seek help and to offer it, as necessary. Yet all three presenters—and for that matter, much of the audience—also seemed *utterly unaware* that the matters they were discussing have been the subject of published research in composition studies stretching back at least to the early 1970s. They seemed to have no idea that the challenges they faced were nothing new, and that published research existed that would not only help them understand their situations, but also offer tested strategies for navigating those situations. They seemed utterly enmeshed in what Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice (borrowing from composition scholar Stephen North) have called “lore.” As one among many forms of potential knowledge, lore can be quite helpful; as the only available form of knowledge, it can be problematic and even at times harmful.

Moving the AWP away from this orientation will be no easy task, but—at the very least—a steady stream of Creative Writing Studies-inflected proposals submitted each year for the AWP convention, as well as Creative Writing Studies-inflected article manuscripts to *The Writers' Chronicle*, should make it clear that people affiliated with the new field want a voice within the organization and are unsatisfied with the current marginalization of their concerns. Even if a new organization for Creative Writing Studies thrives in its own right, the AWP should remain firmly within our sights.

Composition studies moved decades ago beyond individual experience as the sole or primary means of generating knowledge about writing. And CCCC has, at least occasionally, been a more inviting potential home for Creative Writing Studies than AWP. But CCCC's other organizational priorities have often, especially during the past decade and a half, seemed to make Creative Writing Studies little more than an interesting footnote at best. A great deal of my own early scholarship in Creative Writing Studies was presented at CCCC, but recently the organization has become more preoccupied with issues of writing assessment and writing program administration, neither of which (at least yet) provide fertile crossover possibilities for work in Creative Writing Studies. Compositionists have long struggled with the fact that their field has been historically tied to the required first-year composition course, and to the public perception of a “literacy crisis,” that, although it waxes and wanes in intensity, has been a feature of the American public and political landscape since at least the mid-1800s. To their great credit, compositionists have produced some extraordinary work that critiques many of the prevailing notions about writing in our society, as generally reductive, static, and formalistic as they tend to be. And yet these reductive notions have an incredible staying power; they continue to remain in force not only among wide swaths of the general public, but also among many academic professionals.

And perhaps it is here—in attempting to challenge reductive notions of what writing is and how it works, not only through scholarship but also through public outreach—that Creative Writing Studies scholars and practitioners can currently seek common ground with compositionists. Both groups would benefit from such a collaboration, if it were to succeed.

The MLA is probably the most challenging professional organization within which Creative Writing Studies might try to seek a foothold, dedicated as it is to the interpretive analysis of texts as static, “finished” objects. As I argued in *(Re)Writing Craft*, the MLA is one of the major forces that

keeps interpretive literary and cultural study at the conceptual center of English as a discipline. Yet the recent emergence of a group called MLA Democracy, inspired in large measure by MLA's indifference to issues of contingent labor in the academy, but also by MLA's marginalization of subfields other than literary studies, may hint at an opening. If both established and emerging marginalized fields within English studies are able to gain a more powerful voice within the MLA, it may eventually become as important to Creative Writing Studies as AWP and CCCC. Tempting as it may be to write off the MLA and essentially ignore it, as many people in CCCC (and probably quite a few in AWP) have done over the years, its *potential* influence remains immense. Continuing to submit proposals and manuscripts to the MLA, for both conferences and publications, even if the effort is met initially with a wave of rejections, is one small way for Creative Writing Studies scholars to remind this large and powerful organization that we exist.

The past decade has been exciting and challenging for those of us in Creative Writing Studies. There is no doubt that the next decade should be exciting and challenging as well, though the precise nature of those excitements and challenges is quite difficult to predict. Our best path, I suspect, will involve moving in two directions at once—continuing to develop and assert the *distinctiveness* of Creative Writing Studies on the one hand (i.e. highlighting the ways in which it is different from other subfields of English like composition studies, literary studies, and the traditional form of creative writing), but on the other hand striving to integrate it with those other subfields so that the differences between them and it become less obvious. Although this two-fold path may seem contradictory, it leaves open two exciting possibilities. In ten years, Creative Writing Studies may have grown and developed to such an extent that it has become recognized as a *major* subfield of English studies, something as distinctive and established as literary studies and composition studies now are. Alternatively, in ten years Creative Writing Studies may have effectively dissolved itself into those other subfields, having become not a separate offshoot of English studies but a catalyst that helped English studies' other offshoots to blend into a more cohesive whole.

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