

Letter from America Spring 2010

With the advent of A-level study in Creative Writing, there is a clamor to train existing English teachers and/or to certify writers who currently teach without formal qualifications. NAWE is making an interesting proposal to create a consortium of universities that would, collectively, offer a flexible national course to provide such training.

When I read about NAWE's proposal, I decided to phone a poet friend of mine who teaches English at a private high school. (I should point out that "private" here in the US means something roughly akin to "public" in the UK.) I wanted to ask her if the teaching of creative writing was common at her school and whether any training was involved. She's a great resource because she's a writer by training rather than a teacher, and she's taught in universities – and yet she knows the high school world well. Here in the US, public high school teachers have to be accredited, but private high school teachers do not. Usually, an MA or an MFA or a PhD will suffice. Thus, she was able to move from university to high school without additional training.

First, we talked about the world we both know – university. Most of us who teach creative writing in universities have never had any formal teacher training. The majority of post-graduate students in MFA programs or PhD programs earn their keep by serving as T.A.'s (Teaching Assistants). It is a misnomer because a T.A. isn't really anyone's assistant. After a day or two of orientation, we find ourselves in a classroom of first-year composition students. Alone. It's a module that all students at all US universities take regardless of what their majors are (not because of a national curriculum, but because everyone kind of agrees that it's a good idea to teach first-years some writing skills and for now this is how everyone does it). So there's an enormous need to staff composition, and the students don't love taking it. By necessity, you come up with all kinds of techniques for camouflaging the offending subject matter the way one might pour cheese on an unappetizing vegetable. You organize the module around the theme of *Action Movies!* You teach them research skills by inviting them to interview their grandparents. You learn to read the body language of boredom. After a couple years of slogging through that module, teaching creative writing to a group of willing, excited students is a piece of cake!

We are such a large country, and few of the procedures at universities or schools are governed from the top. At universities, there are accreditations, to be sure, but they are not specific enough to affect specific subjects. We don't have national benchmarks, for example. With schools, curriculum is managed locally, too, (by counties more than states even) though there are some national tests that students take in order to compare levels of ability. For better or for worse, I guess one of the things that make us American is our desire to decide our own rules!

Within this context, it's interesting to consider that the subject of Creative Writing in the US has decided for itself that the most important measure qualification that we have is

publication of creative work. I know that publication is important in the UK, too, but having been in both systems, I can tell you that it's given even more weight here. Teaching experience is valued but mainly as a kind of bonus. This is true not only of universities, but also of schools. During our phone conversation, my friend reminded me that many private schools offer fellowships for writers or writer-in-residence positions and that the primary criteria the schools use for selecting their fellow or writer is, quite simply, prestige. If the person also happens to have taught before, that's just gravy. Here's an example of a recent ad for a fellowship. Notice that the application requests no evidence of teaching experience, but focuses entirely on the publications:

Gilman School, an independent boys' school in Baltimore, announces its search to award the fifteenth Tickner Writing Fellowship to a writer in fiction, poetry, playwriting, or creative non-fiction. Responsibilities include teaching one senior elective in creative writing each semester, organizing a series of readings, advising the literary magazine, & working one-to-one with students in the Tickner Writing Center. Salary: \$30,000, plus full benefits package.

To apply: Send CV, cover letter, three confidential letters of recommendation, & a writing sample consisting of either 10 published poems or up to 30 pages of published prose to: Mr. Patrick Hastings, Director of the Tickner Writing Center, Gilman School, 5407 Roland Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21210. Firm deadline for receipt of all materials is January 8, 2010.

Another example of this phenomenon is the state poet laureates. The applications for these positions may ask for some evidence of teaching experience (though just experience, not qualification), and the bulk of the decision is made based on the writer's distinguished publication record. It's interesting since the laureate position mostly involves making classroom visits to school children. A quick Google search brings up the call for applications from Washington State. Again, notice that the application criteria make no mention of teaching experience. Although it mentions one full-length book, everyone knows the laureate will have more than that:

Poet Laureate - Application

The poet laureate will engage in activities to encourage the writing, reading, and appreciation of poetry within the state, including but not limited to readings, workshops, lectures, and presentations. Over a two-year term, these programs will take place in a variety of communities and settings across Washington. The poet laureate will be announced by Governor Chris Gregoire this December.

Qualified applicants must be current residents of the state of Washington and have had at least one full-length book of poetry published.

To the extent that Creative Writing gets taught in public schools, it may be taught by English teachers who have had little or no training. From what I understand, the teachers have very heavy literature loads to teach, and would have little time to teach something that doesn't fit the curriculum. When they do teach it, it may not be a rigorous

exploration of craft, but rather a “self-expression” session. More wealthy school systems, like Fairfax County, where I grew up, may mimic private schools and offer dedicated electives in Creative Writing. Where this happens, it is decided locally, as is the selection of the teacher (and thus credentials). Probably the person would be an English teacher who had shown a special interest in one way or another. Because it’s “only” high school and because it’s unusual for students to have the chance to do Creative Writing at all in public schools, it doesn’t seem to bother anyone that a person without training might conduct these classes. A quick search, though, does yield a couple universities that offer Creative Writing training within English Education certification, but not very many. Here’s an excerpt from the Susquehanna University site. You’ll see that students take only a few Creative Writing workshops:

Requirements for the Creative Writing-Secondary Education Major. 48 - 52 semester hours in Department of English and Creative Writing courses with grades of C- or better.

	12	WRIT:250 courses (Creative Writing), chosen from Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, Creative Nonfiction, Writing for Children, Editing and Publishing, Playwriting
	4-8	WRIT:350 courses (Intermediate Creative Writing), chosen from Fiction, Poetry, Creative Nonfiction
	4	WRIT:450 Fiction (short story, novella, or novel) or WRIT:450 Creative Nonfiction (memoir, personal essay, or literary journalism) or WRIT:450 Poetry (the narrative, the lyric, the sequence, traditional forms or the prose poem)
	4	ENGL:269 English Grammar and the Writing Process
	4	ENGL:290 Aesthetics and Interpretation
	4	WRIT:550 Senior Portfolio
	4	ENGL: 230, 233, or 235 Survey of British Literature
	4	ENGL:220, 225, or 245 Survey of American Literature
	4	ENGL:350 Shakespeare
	4	ENGL:520 Practicum, ENGL:540 Internship or WRIT:590 Independent Writing
		Education courses for secondary education as listed in the Department of Education section of the catalog

I suppose one of the things that I find interesting (and my friend agreed) is that there is no anxiety whatsoever in the US about the lack of formal teaching qualifications within Creative Writing. I’m not suggesting that there should or shouldn’t be anxiety – it’s just interesting to note that there isn’t any. I think that our notion that publication *is* qualification is such a strong and embedded one that it hasn’t occurred to anyone (and probably won’t) to think about it any other way.

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