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Cultural and Ethical Challenges in Teaching Creative Writing: A Comparative Study of Australian and Chinese Classes

Abstract – Point of View and Ideology

A range of factors condition how universities structure creative writing subjects, such as student profiles, educational goals, institutional milieus and cultural orientations. Each of these factors raises ethical questions and suggests responses that affect assessment, workshop environment and research projects. In other words, how teachers deal with students and their work as well as how they conduct research related to their teaching always involve some contemplation of ethics.

This paper explores some of the above issues by comparing the teaching of a creative nonfiction course at Sun Yat-sen University (Guangzhou, China) with creative writing courses at Flinders University (Adelaide, Australia). Student backgrounds and expectations determine how teachers attempt to engage classes and motivate them; how they track progress; how they assess work and how they handle psychological risk. For example, at Sun Yat-sen University, a nonfiction subject's purpose is to motivate students to hone their skills in English-as-a-second-language. Other benefits are for students to write about themselves at university level, share personal experiences with peers in workshops and test their creative abilities. At Flinders University, students in the niche Bachelor of Creative Arts degree are selected partly on demonstration of previous experience in creative writing, and so the goals and student expectations of their subjects differ. By looking at the similarities and differences between student backgrounds, pedagogical strategies and course structures, this paper highlights the ethical challenges that arise for both students and teachers and attempts to place them in a cross-cultural context. Finally, it raises the question of how to develop a cross-cultural pedagogy, given the varying cultural perspectives and, hence, ethics requirements of different nations.

Biographical note:

Professor Jeri Kroll is Dean of Graduate Research at Flinders University in Adelaide, and has published over twenty titles for adults and young people,

including poetry, picture books and novels. *The Mother Workshops*, *Creative Writing Studies* and *felis domestica* are recent books. In 2009, she was a Visiting Fellow at George Washington University (USA) collaborating on a staged reading of her verse novel, *Vanishing Point*, and later took up a Varuna Fellowship to finish the novel. In September a staged reading was also held at the Kennedy Centre's 10th Annual 'From Page to Stage Season of New York.' In early 2012, Palgrave will publish *Research Methods in Creative Writing*.

Biographical note:

Fan Dai is a Professor of English in the Department of English, School of Foreign Languages, Sun Yat-sen University. She has a PhD in Linguistics and a Master's degree in Human Geography. Her creative work includes novels in both Chinese and English. She is studying for her MFA in Creative Writing (nonfiction) at the City University of Hong Kong.

Keywords:

Cross-cultural-pedagogy-ethics-requirements-international-research collaboration.

A range of factors condition how universities structure creative writing subjects, such as student profiles, educational goals, institutional milieus and cultural orientations. Each of these factors raises ethical questions and suggests responses that affect assessment, workshop environment and research projects. This paper explores some of the above issues by comparing the teaching of a creative nonfiction course at Sun Yat-sen University (Guangzhou, China) with creative writing courses at Flinders University (Adelaide, Australia). Course goals determine how teachers attempt to motivate classes, assess work and handle psychological risk. By considering the similarities and differences between Australian and Chinese practice, this paper highlights the ethical challenges that arise for both students and teachers and attempts to place them in a cross-cultural context. Finally, it raises the question of international research collaboration. How can projects that aim to investigate cross-cultural pedagogy be conducted, given the varying cultural perspectives and, hence, ethics requirements of these countries?

I. Introduction: Creative Writing and Cultural Milieu

Debates about creative writing as a subject that has its own content and pedagogy have been carried on in the developed nations for more than a hundred years, first chronicled in the seminal study by David Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (1996). Various goals, such as encouraging creativity, enhancing personal development and improving expression, have been analysed, but critics differ about how achievable or even appropriate those goals are, and how creative writing should situate itself in relation to literary studies as well as its institutional context (McCaw 2011; Dawson 2008). For example, proponents of the psychotherapeutic advantages of creative writing have lined up against those who deplore the fact that it sometimes attracts students who seek catharsis rather than craft. Many writers in the academy note how sophisticated reading skills that widen students' cultural understanding need to be integrated into courses (Wandor 2008, Kroll 2007, McCaw 2011). These debates have been extended in the past three decades, particularly in Australia and the United Kingdom, in journals such as *TEXT* and *New Writing*, to include creative writing as a research discipline that generates new knowledge.

Most recently, creative writing at the university level has been introduced into the Asia-Pacific region. In China, there have been attempts to teach creative writing in both Chinese and English. For example, Ge Hongbin, a professor of Chinese in Shanghai University, had been pushing to set up a creative writing program within the Chinese department since 2000. He proposed to set up creative writing programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels (Ge 2011). Fan Dai started teaching creative nonfiction in

September 2009 for sophomores in the English Department at Sun Yat-sen University, while Sichuan University also offered a fiction course at the same time to senior English majors.

These initiatives in Asia raise questions not only about creative writing's function and pedagogy, but also about the cultural appropriateness of teaching writing in both a native language and a second language such as English. Analyses of some of those questions have been tackled in papers focused on Singapore, Hong Kong and Pakistan in *New Writing* (Tay and Leung 2011; Mansoor 2010) and canvassed in terms of regional development at forums of the Asia-Pacific Writing Partnership (<http://apwriters.org/>).¹ Papers from the recent symposium in 2010 have appeared in a *TEXT Special Issue: Creative Writing in the Asia-Pacific Region* (2011). These questions are outside this paper's scope, but it is important to place the teaching of writing in China within the context of current debates and expanding postgraduate programs.²

This discussion about the 'why' and 'how' of teaching writing reveals the significance of cultural milieu, institutional orientation and subject goals. One critical question to ask is whether methodologies developed in a Western context can be valid for other cultures. Kim Cheng Boey draws attention to the possibility that '...the import of Creative Writing may be regarded as yet another form of Western cultural imperialism...' (Boey 2011: 3). Certainly a clear conception of program goals will help to determine structures and strategies.

One goal could simply be to help non-native speakers to use English effectively, but another could be to mentor the next generation of writers, many of whom might come from a bilingual background and who want to exploit this richness and their resulting liminality. Eddie Tay speaks about the influence of Edwin Thumboo in Singapore and asserts that 'a major aspect of Thumboo's creative writing class has to do with cultivating the awareness of one's culture [sic] milieu and hence the need to dissociate one's writing from the Anglo-American literary canons even as one writes in English' (Tay and Leung 2011: 104). This latter comment differentiates students whose goal might be mastery of idiomatic English for professional purposes from those who have chosen to write wholly or in part in English as an expression of a hybrid cultural heritage. Brian Castro employs the metaphor of 'translation' to differentiate between creative writing courses in Australia and Asia and yet connect them at a deeper level by suggesting that 'writing...is a practice that translates us to ourselves. It is a way of crossing cultures...' (Castro 2011: 4), and advocates literary translation as an adjunct to creative writing programs.

Teaching creative writing in a lingua franca such as English is a complex process, therefore. Is the subject taught in an effort to develop students who

have a facility for writing and, thus, focuses on enhancing creativity, improving expression and inducting apprentices into the responsibilities of being part of a writing community? Is the goal to allow non-native speakers to communicate effectively in a competitive economic and global environment? We suggest that in most courses the goals are multiple and complex.

To begin understanding the dynamics of these interrelated goals and the ethical challenges of cross-cultural teaching we will limit ourselves to comparing three courses: two at Flinders University, and one at Sun Yat-sen University. Flinders students are enrolled in the niche Bachelor of Creative Arts/Creative Writing degree and, each year, take a dedicated writing workshop. Chinese students take the one-year creative writing course as English majors at Sun Yat-sen University. These sophomores have to take three compulsory writing courses throughout their four-year study. We will concentrate on subject format and assignment type in order to analyse how course goals are achieved and ethics protocols observed.

2 Creative Writing in Australia: Course Goals

The Bachelor of Creative Arts/Creative Writing cohort and creative writing honours students study within the context of a department that introduced its first writing subject in 1979.³ By the time the honours program began in 1998 and the niche BCA degree in 2002 a raft of topics open to BA students were available.⁴ The way in which applicants to the BCA program are screened is determined by that context, identifying students with the potential to complete the program successfully.⁵ Prospective students must meet the minimum admission score for the Flinders BA as well as to submit a twenty-page writing Portfolio and Statement of Interest.

We turn first to CREA 2100: Advanced Creative Writing Workshop, for BCA second-years only. Introductory material explains that students will ‘focus on their own projects in an intensive workshop environment... attempt a longer work... and hone their editing skills (Kroll 2011). Collaborative projects and oral presentation are encouraged. Assigned reading of literary, popular and theoretical texts provides a contemporary and historical context. The topic aims to help students acquire a broader cultural perspective too. A Writers and Their Worlds Seminar Series hosting local, national and international speakers provides students with the creative industries’ context to situate their own practice. The teacher works towards professional, practical and critical outcomes, therefore, including student understanding of themselves as ethical practitioners. The class learns that the ultimate goal for a writing graduate might not be finding a sustainable market for one’s work. Transferrable writing skills are directed towards achievement or employment in the communication and creative industries in addition to academia. In sum, this topic has a craft, professional and cultural focus.

At the outset, ethical guidelines are provided in a Workshopping (Hints, Procedure, Protocol) document. It defines ethics⁶ to help class members to make explicit their implicit assumptions about practice. Many students write nonfiction with an historical or autobiographical focus; many integrate material from their lives into fiction in a less obvious way. Some of that material might challenge their peers' social, ethnic or religious beliefs. Since the majority of students come from Australian secondary schools, they have become accustomed to this practice of mining their lives for material, but they might not have discussed its potential dangers. Indeed, the explosion of life writing narratives in what Paul John Eakin calls 'an age of memoir, fostered by a pervasive culture of confession in the media' (2004:1), has no doubt infiltrated if not saturated young people's lives in the developed nations. One of the lessons that need to be learned by those who wish to participate in a global literary community is that 'life writers are criticized not only for *not* telling the truth—personal and historical—but also for telling too much truth' (Eakin 2004:3).

The Workshopping document summarised below foregrounds the ethical context within which students create.

“We ask you to be considerate and sensitive to the feelings of others, and NOT write about your fellow students. We ask you not to submit work that would be considered libellous if published or broadcast” (from “Introductory Remarks” [in Introduction to Creative Writing BA topic developed by staff members]).

As writers, you are working with human subjects. Fiction writers and poets have to consider some of the same issues journalists and broadcasters do....Writing about the living or even the deceased can have social, if not legal, ramifications (you cannot, for instance, libel the dead).

The issue of ownership of material in both fiction and nonfiction has been debated frequently in recent years particularly in relation to Indigenous material. Who owns specific stories? Who has the right to use them? Whom does a writer seek out to gain permission?

Questions follow to spark discussion, encouraging students as apprentice writers to consider social responsibility by interrogating their assumptions about their freedom to create, beginning with the first that is perhaps the broadest: 'Do you believe that writers should be free to write about anyone or anything, regardless of the consequences?' Students are asked to check with the lecturer before submitting any material that might be challenging or confronting. Psychological risk is managed within the workshop hothouse

and, as at all Australian universities, counselling services are available to deal with possible emotional fallout. The Ethics document explains that these questions are relevant now but that writers have to face them throughout their careers as well: 'The workshop is a microcosm of the larger world you will face as artists participating in a diverse culture,' it concludes.

The Honours Theory and Practice of Writing Topics (ENGL 7071/7072⁷, taken by both BCA and BA cohorts) reviews the same ethical protocols as the undergraduate workshops. One honours assignment is particularly relevant here. The Autobiographical Writing Exercise highlights the complex negotiations that engaging with personal material in the public sphere involve.

Write a poem or short prose piece about someone in your family or a close friend. Then analyse in a paragraph or two why you think you could/should or could not publish the piece. How much can we incorporate our own lives into our writing? Should privacy be an issue? Is it possible for us to be truthful (and is there such a thing as truth in this regard)?

These self-reflexive questions foreground the ethics of exploiting the private for public consumption.⁸ Students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB), indeed from any culture where privacy is guarded, might face more complex challenges, while Indigenous students might grapple with the question of sensitive material and its ownership. These debates occur as students confront their responsibility as ethical practitioners who want to use potent material.

3 Creative Writing in China: Course Goals

The type of creative writing course taught at Sun Yat-sen University is new in Chinese tertiary institutions. Two courses were taught previously by Australian and US scholars at Beijing Forestry and at Wuhan University, but they ran for only one and three years respectively (Dai 2010: 548). One other course, fashioned after the western model, was first offered to senior students for one semester in September 2009 at Sichuan University, taught by four young teachers who had received training through workshops at their sister institution, Arizona State University (Dai 2011). The course at Sun Yat-sen University is creative nonfiction and is arguably the first of its kind combining the western tradition of the workshop with the teaching of English as a second language. Previously it was called Writing, as part of the curriculum for training English proficiency.⁹ Students frequently complained that the course was boring because they had to write about things they could not relate to.

The Creative Nonfiction course taught by Fan Dai aims to integrate speaking, reading, and listening with writing by encouraging students to focus on their lives. In workshops students discuss their assignments and are encouraged to critique peers' stories. In the process they share experiences of growing up. The course aims not only to teach the craft of creative writing, therefore, but also to address linguistic issues. It hopes, ultimately, that students will write 'inside stories' for a wider English-reading audience. To date two groups (comprising approximately thirty students each) have taken the course. They have already received comprehensive training as English majors in speaking, listening, reading and writing. They come from different parts of China and their levels of English vary on arrival, although by the time they take creative nonfiction they all are able to write stories in English.¹⁰

The Creative Nonfiction course does not provide any printed ethical guidelines for a number of reasons, as opposed to Australian courses. Firstly, creative nonfiction is new in the Chinese context; the university has not developed official guidelines. Secondly, the primary purpose for writing nonfiction is to give students the opportunity to express themselves in a way that suits them, not necessarily to produce stories for publication. Thirdly, writing in English serves as a buffer; whoever might be the subject of a story (assuming it is not another student in the class) is not likely to read it. Students tend to write about themselves or people very close to them. The culture of the classroom assumes that they (and the teacher) can judge suitability and control ethical fallout, although this does put pressure on individual judgment.

As someone who has studied in the west and who is at present doing her MFA in Creative Nonfiction at City University of Hong Kong, Fan Dai has been aware of ethical issues in her teaching and in her use of students' work. In her first lecture, she explains about ethical issues in the western context. She asks students to tell her if they do not feel comfortable sharing their stories with others. She also tells them to let her know if they do not want their work cited, either in her lecture or in research papers. These serve as the only ethical guidelines. A university-wide ethics committee or ethical protocols per se do not exist so students do not have to sign release forms.

In each of the two semesters of the course, students take Reading as a Writer, Workshops and Summary lectures. In Reading as a Writer, students study techniques in stories by established writers. Workshops are divided into two groups; students critique two of their peers' stories, focusing on each for forty-five minutes. In the summary lecture, Fan Dai uses student work to illustrate how writing techniques have been applied; equally important is the necessity of 'striving for linguistic accuracy.'¹¹

The topics suggested for stories are general so that students have the most freedom to write about what interests them, but they have the option of generating topics too. In the last two years, stories have been written about relationships with parents or other relatives, boy/girl friendships and high school experiences. Several assignments came close to raising ethical issues. One involved two students who asked not to share their stories. One of the cases related to the woman writer's former boyfriend who turned out to be gay. The student wanted to protect the privacy of the friend. The teacher respected the student's choice. Another student, who originally intended to share her story with the class, decided that she was not ready, although she felt guilty because other classmates had shared private things. Fan Dai discussed the story with her, which concerned the student's Adam's apple. She suggested that sharing a story about a personal defect would resonate with the class. The student agreed to share and reported that she felt liberated as a result. This catharsis was not the intended aim of the writing exercise, but a motivational benefit.

Many situations arise from workshop dynamics. For example, one group looked at a story concerning the writer's attachment to a childhood boyfriend who was not aware of her affection. Much of the discussion centred on the relationship itself rather than on writing techniques. Another involved students who have said initially that they do not want to write about private matters, suggesting that they are grappling with ethical as well as personal issues: they do not know how to deal with the revelations of others and so they do not feel safe writing about themselves. To date, once students have written stories, Fan Dai reports, they almost always agree for their work to be cited in the summary lecture with their names identified. There is no formal process, however, for providing counselling and no way of assessing how much the lecturer's authority contributes to the student's acquiescence.

To summarise, although Fan Dai does not need to provide ethical guidelines for writing creative nonfiction, some students have felt the need for guidance because they understand the tension generated by true stories as writers as well as readers. Such tension is largely related to the sharing of personal details. This poses challenges for the teacher and requires flexibility and sensitivity on her part.

4 Conclusion

In the Flinders Bachelor of Creative Arts/Creative Writing workshops and Honours courses, the focus on technical expression, stylistic competency, literary models and appreciation of a writer's responsibilities stem from the educational goal to initiate apprentices into a particular cultural milieu – that of the creative arts worker. The students come highly motivated. As a group they are used to writing about themselves and generally do not appear

uncomfortable with discussing personal material. Part of a teacher's challenge is to make them step back from the context of a particular workshop to enable them to understand the concept of ethical responsibility. One workshop goal is to ensure that they bring this ethical understanding with them to other courses and to the creative arts community that they will join when they leave university.

With second-language creative writing students at Sun Yat-sen University, the function of the Creative Nonfiction class is, at least initially, narrower: to let students choose their own subjects within specific parameters in order to motivate them to write as a means of improving English proficiency. The two-year experience proved an effective way to teach English. One of the course's secondary benefits includes personal development; students report that by writing about themselves they gain new perspectives and also become aware of the ethical issues involving creative nonfiction.

We can see that in some aspects the primary and secondary advantages for students in taking each course are reversed. Australian creative writing students develop their practice and as a consequence become more technically proficient writers and editors, which might lead to alternate career paths. Sun Yat-sen English Language majors improve their skills in a second language and, as a result, learn how to express themselves creatively and perhaps discover their facility in the nonfiction genre. In this way they can share their individual cultural perspectives with a global audience. On a primary level, both Australian and Chinese classes introduce students to language as a living organism that serves a range of purposes and is affected by its interaction with individuals and cultures, each of which possess their own ethical perspectives.

This paper has only briefly examined the similarities and differences between Australian and Chinese courses, but it suggests areas for further study. The challenge of developing a cross-cultural creative writing pedagogy is matched by trying to conduct a research project to enable teachers to share strategies and so improve student outcomes.¹² One question that such a project might address would be, 'How can strategies to improve expression be adapted for another culture?' A second question might be, 'How do teachers increase sensitivity to language and its nuances among native as well as second-language speakers?' A third might be, 'How do teachers act ethically themselves and instil a sense of ethics in a diverse student population?'

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Notes

¹ The Asia-Pacific Writing Partnership was established in 2005: 'Our aims & What We Do...The Asia-Pacific Writing Partnership seeks to build international understanding of the Asia-Pacific's diverse cultures and creative approaches through literary connections' (<http://apwriters.org/what-we-do/>).

² A Master of Fine Arts Degrees in Writing (in English) is already offered by the University of Hong Kong (mid-residency <http://www0.hku.hk/english/mfa.htm>) and City University of Hong Kong (low-residency <http://www.english.cityu.edu.hk/mfa/>).

³ Jeri Kroll's *The Craft of Poetry*.

⁴ This expansion was reflected nationally in the proliferation of university creative arts programs and serviced by artist-academics, many of whom had overseas experience of studying or teaching their art forms.

⁵ Admission is offered only to 15-17 students each year in the Creative Writing Stream. Four BCA streams are offered: Creative Writing, Digital Media, Drama and Screen Production. Each stipulates their own admission criteria (for example, audition in Drama) but have similarly small numbers.

⁶ Ethics: n. pl. 1. a system of moral principles, by which human actions and proposals may be judged good or bad or right or wrong. (*Macquarie Dictionary*)

⁷ ENGL 7171 and 7172 have since been superceded by new topic codes and structures, due to a university-wide curriculum review in 2010.

⁸ A wealth of literature now exists about dealing with trauma. See, for example, Kate Douglas' *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma and Memory*.

⁹ Previously it focused on non-creative genres that typically included summary writing and paragraph development, narration and description, patterns of exposition, argumentation and persuasion, etc., as well as giving instruction on writing coherently and concisely.

¹⁰ High schools in the better-developed areas such as Guangzhou, Shanghai and Hangzhou are more efficient in teaching English. After the freshmen year, students who had arrived with less well developed English skills tend to have caught up to varying degrees, but the difference in levels can still be seen. All students are able to write stories in English, however, without causing much misunderstanding for native speakers.

¹¹ Fan Dai analyses awkwardly constructed sentences and misuse of words; collectively students are asked to think of better expressions.

¹² Fan Dai was able to use student work in her research without the approval of a University Ethics Committee. In order to conduct the same type of research, Jeri Kroll needed University Ethics Approval and if Chinese students had been involved in a cross-institutional project, the same Australian ethical protocols would have to be observed.