

Independent Scholar

Dr. Amanda Apthorpe

Minding the Gap between Aspiration and Achievement

Abstract

The spark of creative inspiration is a powerful one and the fledgling writer rides this wave of energy with hope and vitality. For some the desire to write remains strong, turning inspiration into aspiration, towards success that may be measured in a variety of ways.

Others are in danger of falling into a gap between their aspiration and their achievement that is filled with the detritus of doubts, crumbled self-esteem and procrastination. Novice writers need to build their own bridges. It can be done with dogged determination and talent, but some must learn how; they need a guide.

How does a teacher enable students of creative writing to build a bridge between their aspiration and their achievement? While training for the acquisition of writing skills is fundamental, the teacher can be instrumental in guiding the students to locate their inner resources.

Teachers of creative writing assist their students to locate and enhance their own wellspring of creativity. Based on my experience as a writer and teacher, this paper focuses on two factors - effective time management and development of an individual writing voice that I have found effective in this regard, and offers methods to sustain the novice writer on their individual writing journeys beyond the classroom.

Biographical Note:

Dr Amanda Apthorpe is a published author, teacher and mentor of creative writing. She holds a MA and PhD in creative writing from The University of Melbourne; her thesis comprised a novel and dissertation on the role of myth in contemporary Australian women's fiction. Amanda's experience as a writer and teacher in the Diploma of Professional Writing and Editing provides insights into the challenges facing her students—the need to locate their own writing voice or style, to overcome doubts and procrastination and to build the skills, resilience and self-reliance necessary to achieve their goals. She considers the role of the teacher as significant in this attainment. Amanda's novel *Whispers in the Wiring* was published in 2011.

Keywords: Practice-led research, writing voice, time management, procrastination, ethnography, teaching methodology

Introduction

The students of creative writing that I teach fall into two categories - those at the undergraduate level, and those who enrol in a short course, usually for three hours a week for five or six weeks. Students in the latter category squeeze the course into the hours left after work or other day commitments, pay a considerable fee to do so, and are not rewarded with a qualification at the conclusion; their motivation is simply the desire to write. Some come with a work in progress—in both of my courses this is usually a novel—while most have tinkered, or have a vague idea of what they want to write. All of them do want to write.

What is it that draws a novice writer to a class rather than writing independently? Is it the attainment of skills in a structured learning environment, the desire to express oneself through the written word and to gauge the ‘worth’ of that expression, and to be in an environment that understands, nurtures and inspires? SJ Watson, wrote his bestselling novel *Before I Go to Sleep* (2012) during a six month novel writing course. In his article, “What a Creative Writing Course Taught Me”, he acknowledges that the course gave him focus and that he learned that the only way to become a better writer is by writing (The Guardian, 18 January 2013). Robert Sternberg (2010) affirms that while one could have all the internal resources needed to think creatively, this may never be displayed without a supportive and rewarding environment in which to express creative ideas (88).

In my experience, accompanying the students’ reasons for attending classes, there is a good measure of insecurity and doubt about their ability to write, and the ability to sustain a writing project in the face of the many conflicting demands on time and energy.

One of the most pleasurable aspects of teaching creative writing is the energy and enthusiasm the students bring to the class. Though they often commence with anxiety and self-consciousness, in most instances this gives way to a collegial sharing of ideas and constructive feedback on each other’s work. A student might report that he or she ‘wrote for hours’ in the period between lessons, ‘had a breakthrough’ in coming to know a central character, or resolved a structural issue.

Generally, the students begin to take more notice of the world around them, to use their senses to experience that world, and to draw on what it is that they know from their own experience, and this is reflected in the improved quality of writing as the course progresses. Yet, despite this energy and enthusiasm, many students admit to not spending much time on their writing in the period between classes—unless it is a required assessment—with the main reason given being a lack of time due to other commitments.

Students can be in danger of falling into the gap between the aspiration to write, for example, a novel, and the achievement of finishing it to first draft. Sometimes this is not unexpected. Skills might be improved during a course, but there are those who struggle with a modicum of natural writing talent, and others who, having plenty of talent and skill, struggle with mental or emotional difficulties that preclude them being able to sustain a project to its completion. These cases lie outside the scope of this paper. However, for many other students, the reasons for procrastinating over a writing project or abandoning it altogether are less clear and include those students who have considerable ability. Taken on an individual basis, there may be a range of contributing factors, and techniques for overcoming them. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on two that I feel contribute significantly to this outcome - poor time management and an undeveloped sense of a writing voice. This paper offers methods that I have implemented to address these two factors—though I recognise that these are not the only methods—and offer them in light of the improvement I have witnessed in the students’ motivation and time management between classes.

Time Management

The students in my classes often claim to be time-poor due to conflicting demands in their personal or working lives and are representative of the wider experience of the general population. However, their enrolment in a degree or shorter course reflects an investment of time and money to turn their writing aspirations into an achievement. During a lesson, they will write on a particular task with great intensity and I am often reluctant to call an end to it. As I observe each student, their absorption in the written word never fails to convince me that their desire to write is genuine.

However, something happens to some of the students when they leave the class. In the space between lessons, which in some cases might be a week, the desire to write might stay as strong, but the commitment to actually do so evaporates. The danger is that, once the course has concluded, a project that began and developed with so much energy and potential will be abandoned all together. Certainly there are students who maintain the commitment and passion to write during the week and return the following lesson having ridden a wave of inspiration. It could be that such students have enough intrinsic motivation that they will not experience a gap between their aspiration and the achievement of their writing goal, but this is not necessarily true for all. It might be that they have negotiated the demands on their time outside the class to accommodate more time for writing for the duration of the course, or perhaps the energy and motivation experienced within the lesson has a lingering effect for the week. Once the course is concluded they, too, might be in danger of falling into the gap.

The results of Zampetakis, Bouranta and Moustakis' 2010 study on the relationship between time management and creativity indicated that individual creativity is positively related to daily planning behaviour. While the results gleaned from the self-rating of 186 participants from a variety of fields in which creative thinking is a significant component (e.g. engineering) did not determine whether an individual's amount of creativity was responsible for time management techniques or the other way around, they did find that the correlation between the two was stronger when creativity was considered as product oriented (focusing on the extent to which outcomes are useful and novel) compared to correlations obtained with a general creative personality construct (27). For the creative writer, this product orientation should arise from intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation, as determined by the research of Teresa Amabile (1985). Her findings showed that writers who were extrinsically motivated to write (i.e. motivated to engage in a writing task by external goals such as the promise of reward or the expectation of evaluation) were temporarily less creative when concentrating on those extrinsic goals, than those who were intrinsically motivated to engage in a particular task (i.e. motivated to engage in a writing task primarily their own interest and involvement in the task) (393). According to Robert Sternberg, this intrinsic motivation is not something inherent in a person, instead, one decides to be motivated and to look for ways to make a task more interesting (88).

Although Amabile's research indicated that writers were more creative when intrinsically motivated, in those moments when the writing starts to feel like work, extrinsic motivation (e.g. teacher direction and expectation) may be the best motivation available (Baer and McKool 284). Working from the premise that time management techniques might lead to greater creativity, and that intrinsic motivation could be enhanced by building a daily pattern to help sustain the writing journey beyond the classroom, the following exercises have been developed.

Methods for establishing effective time management

Merging the writing self with the daily self

In her article "The Writer's Brain: What Neurology Tells Us about Teaching Creative Writing" (2010), Rosanne Bane states that the potential conflict between the limbic system and the cerebral cortex accounts for writer's block and other forms of writer's resistance. When the limbic system is stimulated, behaviour is instinctual based on the fight-or-flight response. The effect is to limit the input from the cerebral cortex thus temporarily depriving the ability for creative thought (2). Bane suggests that instructors can help students overcome this conflict by promoting writing habits and

routines, 'Writing rituals take advantage of Hebb's Law, which states that neurons that fire together, wire together.' (6)

When I began teaching creative writing, I would instruct the students to devote time to writing in the days between classes. Such vague instruction was destined for failure. On returning to class the following week, some had written enthusiastically every day, while others had not succeeded in writing anything at all, claiming that they just could not find the time. (It was a different matter if the writing task was part or whole of an assessment item in which case nearly all students 'found' the time.) As a result, the instruction was modified to 'write a minimum of one sentence every day'. This might appear to be a radical compromise on my part, but it proved to be very effective, especially when accompanied by a rather stern warning, 'and if you can't write a sentence a day, you will never write a novel.' The following week, all had written their sentence each day, and of course, more than that. The number of minimum sentences increased incrementally over the weeks (usually a period of five weeks for the short course students, and seventeen weeks for the undergraduates), until all students were writing at least 500 words every day and, in some cases, up to several thousand.

The purpose of this exercise is to reinforce writing time to be a fundamental component of a daily routine. The students (mostly) came to experience this time as so much a part of that routine that they felt 'odd', 'out of whack', if, for some reason they were not able to do it.

Locating the 'best' time to write

Following the instruction to write a sentence every day proves to be most effective when each student determines for him or herself the best time of day or night to write. As part of a reflection on their individual writing processes, the students consider the demands on time in their day and their own internal biological energy levels and rhythms. A survey of the class always reveals great diversity in what is considered to be the 'best' time to write. If this time is to be effectively used, the criteria for best time include: sufficient if not high creative energy levels and few or no interruptions. Students are also encouraged to nominate the same time every day as much as is possible, and then write a commitment to use that time.

A daily writing practice, and at the same time of day or night assists the establishment of writing as an integral component of the student's daily life. Rituals create create new neural pathways, soothe the limbic brain so that the cerebral cortex can function optimally (Bane 8). When maintained over

a period of just five weeks, the students report greater confidence in their ability to sustain the practice at the conclusion of the course.

When you just don't know what to write: spontaneous writing

Locating the best time to write and writing at least a sentence every day is effective in establishing time-management skills and in merging the concept of the writing self with the daily self. However, most writers know that the page or screen can sometimes be daunting and demanding of our best. There can be the moment of freezing, not certain where to begin—the limbic system is in ascendance.

In order for the students to overcome the resistance-causing limbic system and to move into higher cognitive functions necessary for writing and learning, Bane stresses that teachers/instructors must find ways to help students relax in the writing classroom and during out-of-class writing so that their cerebral cortex can reengage (4). This view is reinforced by Dominique Hecq (2008) reflecting on instructions for a writing session that involved rapid free association, ‘... what we might all need was a class in relaxation, which is not as absurd as it sounds, anxiety being the crippling affect *par excellence*.’ (2005)

Spontaneous writing, also known as free-flow or stream of consciousness writing, is a common tool for teachers of creative writing because it is an effective means of engaging the students immediately in the writing process and in assisting them in locating their writing voice. I begin each class with this exercise by offering lead in words, which they continue in their own style as soon as all students are seated, and without waiting for them to settle. Some are tired, some are tense from a day of work, some are rushed and ‘rattled’ from negotiating city traffic to arrive on time and others are languid from a day of doing too little. We begin. Always, the pens are suspended above the page or hands above the keyboard. A few words are written, then scratched out or deleted. A pause. Another attempt, and off they go. They are absorbed in their own use of language and the emergence of their writing voice.

While the disruptive start appears to be counter to the need to create a relaxing atmosphere as suggested by Bane and Hecq, a routine is soon established. The students’ anticipation that this is what they will do as soon as they are seated allows for more immediate engagement in the writing process. The deliberately unsettled start, and lead in words that have no obvious bearing on their immediate experience are tools to instill the notion that it is possible to write, even when conditions for writing are not ideal and when you might not feel like it.

Developing a writing routine, locating the best time to write, and prompting writing through the use of spontaneous writing activities combine to enable the establishment of effective time management skills, and to enhance creativity that will endure beyond the classroom.

Methods for Locating and Developing Voice

Are the students in my classes writing more regularly because the task is imposed on them (i.e. an extrinsic goal to motivate them), but are less creative as a result or, is the management of time an indication of personal (intrinsic) motivation and goal orientation?

The novice writers who attend a structured learning environment rather than working independently are an interesting study in themselves. In one sense their motivation comes from extrinsic factors such as teacher direction and feedback in workshopping, but their commitment of time and money towards either an interest or profession that promises little financial reward or public acknowledgment suggests strong intrinsic motivation. Rarely, would I hear a student say that he or she is enrolled in the course with publication being the prime goal. While this is an aspiration for most, it is not, at least in my experience, the most significant motivating factor. Rather, the students refer to more aesthetic goals - the desire to express their thoughts and emotions, to sort creative ideas into a cohesive structure, to learn or enhance their skills. Older students already established in careers often say they simply want to find or develop a more creative side of their nature in contrast to the more pragmatic one that has dominated their working lives. In her article 'What motivates the aspiring creative writer?' Mary Manning concluded that there is no single reason. 'It is about inventing things, and sometimes avoiding or disguising the truth. Paradoxically, it can also be about discovering some truth through the process of writing.' (Eureka Street 15 May 2007)

Amabile identified seven reasons for writing being defined as intrinsic: getting pleasure out of reading something you have written; enjoying the opportunity for self-expression; achieving new insights through your writing; deriving satisfaction from expressing yourself clearly and eloquently; feeling relaxed when writing; enjoying the play with words; enjoying becoming involved with ideas, characters, events, and images in your writing (396). These are the hallmarks of an effective creative writing class. Her research found no evidence that concentrating on intrinsic reasons for writing caused a temporary increase in creativity and confirmed the difficulty of finding methods to increase intrinsic motivation (397). In this paper I do not propose a solution, but offer methods based on observational data. On the basis of (my perceived) increase in the creativity of students' writing, and their expressions of increased satisfaction with their own writing, and their improved commitment to writing in the periods between classes, I suggest that, alongside improving time

management skills, locating/developing their own writing voice is fundamental to increasing intrinsic motivation.

Spontaneous Writing

In the discussion above, I confirm that spontaneous writing is an important tool in the establishment of effective time management, and it is also effective in developing and locating the individual writing voice. The exercises presented here are an amalgamation of my own and those developed by Thaisa Frank and Dorothy Wall (1994) and Caroline Jones (1998).

1. (i) As outlined, the students engage in a spontaneous writing exercise prompted by a word or a phrase that they have to continue at the commencement of each class, to reinforce that they are capable of writing as soon as seated, and that it is not dependent on being comfortable or in a creative mindset. These exercises prompt the students to write without an internal critic, to enable emotions, buried thoughts and memories to rise to the surface, and to make connections between long-held ideas and to create new ones. Sometimes, the writing is disjointed, or commences with little more than 'I don't know what to write', but the process of writing is its own inspiration. Over a period of weeks, the students have a collection of writings that provide valuable material to draw on for a larger project.

(ii) Nonsense writing. Unlike the free-form activity above that usually results in a flow of cohesive ideas (though the students are not restricted to this), nonsense writing has rules that restrict this flow - sentences must be grammatical, but the words must not link together in any consciously associative way (though may carry metaphoric weight on reading). Instructions given to the students are as follows:

- You can focus on the things in the room, randomly place words that come to you from memories, anything that comes into your mind (but must obey the rules) ... Don't listen to the inner critic - just let go.
- Read through your work. Record any thoughts on this activity, for example:
- How did it feel to be unfettered by an inner critic when writing?
- Did you feel a cadence, rhythm of your language?
- Any ideas arise that might be worth exploring?

This activity can uncover layers of the students' own language systems, excavating voice, and/or students may experience cadence and rhythm in their voice (Frank and Wall 18).

2. A few of my favourite things

This exercise aims to locate the values, emotions or themes that are important to each student as a way of identifying voice and is based on Caroline Jones's *An Authentic Life* (1998).

The instructions as follows:

- Think back to when you were young (between the ages of 7 and 12). What were your favourite things to do? List as many as you can remember. (Give plenty of time for this as it can take some students time to remember);
- Have a look at your list. Cross out those things you no longer do or have an interest in. Have you retained any in your life to now? If not, what has replaced them? (Invite students to share if comfortable).
- Your favourite things to do are a personal indication of what is important to you. Can you locate values/emotions in these things? For example, If you love to garden, a value could be the need to nurture something; Ask yourself why you like to do this thing(s).
- Keep the above in mind as you write the following exercise:

Spontaneous Writing Exercise: "I like to ...". Include reasons why you like to do this.

I allocate three minutes for this task then ask them to pause as I instruct the following:

Now continue in the 3rd person, that is, rewrite as though you are talking about someone else, making sure you include why he/she likes to ... It doesn't have to relate to you anymore and you can invent the reasons. I suggest that they stay with the same gender.

Or: If a novel is underway: write for your central character - What does he/she like to do? Why?

The change to 3rd person point of view encourages the transfer of emotions and values based on personal experience to an existing or potential character and to explore that inner world. This does not suggest that all characters need reflect personal experience, but is a springboard for the novice writer in the development of character. The advantage of this approach for the new writer is that the natural voice of the writer has inbuilt strengths, usually flows easily, is consistent, has the energy of real life and sounds convincing, whereas the borrowed voice might become lifeless and sound false (Grenville 81).

The following activity is an extension of the previous activity. As this is a more personal reflection, sharing what they have written is voluntary.

3. Point of Difference

Think about your experiences to this point in your life. Think about the way you 'see' or 'understand' the world i.e. how might it be different to the other people in this room?

What has contributed to this understanding? Consider the following possible influences: family, education, travel, sport, personal values, friends, partners, religious belief or not, life challenges, life blessings, risk-taking or not;

What is it that you will bring to your writing, that is your ‘take’ or point of difference about life/what’s important to you?

Write: ‘The way that I see the world is ...’

Allow three minutes as above and instruct to return to 3rd person point of view. This works well if continuing with the same character developed in the previous exercise.

Conclusion

Teachers of creative writing invest their knowledge and passion in assisting their students to access their own wellspring of creativity. While many students go on to achieve success, in whatever way that is measured, others are in danger of abandoning their writing aspirations. Katherine Haake (2000) writes, “... the final goal of any creative writing curriculum ought to be to provide students with the experience, materials, and the framework within which they can define the guiding questions that will sustain writing through the rest of their lives.” (19) The methods presented here offer a way of minding the gap between aspiration and achievement to enable students to maintain their writing journey beyond the classroom.

Works cited:

Amabile, Teresa M. 1985 'Motivation and creativity: effects of motivational orientation on creative writers', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1985, Vol. 48, No. 2, 393-399

Baer, John and McKool, Sharon S. 2009 'How Rewards and Evaluations Can Undermine Creativity (and How to Prevent This)', 277-286, *The Psychology of Creative Writing* ed. Scott Kaufman B. and Kaufman, James C. (eds) Cambridge University Press, New York

Bane, Rosanne 2010 'The Writer's Brain: What Neurology Tells Us about Teaching Creative Writing', *Creative Writing: Teaching Theory & Practice* 41, February 2010, Vol. 2. No. 1. 41-50

Frank, Thaisa & Wall, Dorothy 1994 *Finding Your Writer's Voice: A Guide to Creative Fiction*, St Martin's Griffin, New York

Grenville, Kate 1990 *The Writing Book: A Workbook for Fiction Writers*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards NSW

Haake, Katharine 2000 *What Our Speech Disrupts*, USA: National Council of Teachers of English

Hecq, Dominique 2005 'Uncanny encounters: on writing, anxiety and *jouissance*', *Double Dialogues* 6: Anatomy and Poetics http://www.doubledialogues.com/issue_six/hecq.html return to text

—2008 'Writing the unconscious: psychoanalysis for the creative writer', *TEXT* 12, 2 (October): <http://www.textjournal.com.au> (accessed 5 September 2014)

Jones, Caroline 1998 *An Authentic Life*, ABC Books, Sydney

Manning, Mary 'What motivates the aspiring creative writer?' Eureka Street 15 May 2007

Sternberg, Robert J. 2006 'The Nature of Creativity', *Creativity Research Journal*, 2006, Vol. 18, No. 1, 87-98

Watson, SJ 2013 'What a Creative Writing Course taught me', *The Guardian*, 18 January 2013

Zampetakis, L.A., Bouranta, N. & Moustakis, V. 2010 'On the relationship between individual creativity and time management,' *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 23-32