After scarcity: question of value in teaching and learning creative writing

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Introduction
This paper explores a paradox in the recent rise of UK creative writing in education and cultural policy. It is the awkward silence about value and values that accompanied the change from cultural policy and educational practice predicated on scarcity and elitism to policy and practice organised around the principles of participation, diversity and social inclusion. I outline these policy changes, including the educational turn of the early 1990s, which, I argue, made education both the agent and guarantor of cultural change and discuss the value regime which accompanied these changes. In doing so, I draw on Jim McGuigan’s (1992) critique of cultural populism to argue that the radical potential of the cultural-democracy campaigns of the late 20th century, which were in important ways arguments about value, were sold short by many creative writing initiatives in formal and informal education because the rhetoric of empowerment they were founded upon was not accompanied by a critical engagement with the writing process, writing’s substantive or ideological content and its broad institutional organisation and frameworks. These ideas are developed at greater length in my study of British creative writing (O'Rourke 2005). I then discuss the implications for teaching and learning creative writing of the submerged discourse of value.

Thinking about value
The time has come to reclaim the word ‘excellence’ from its historic, elitist undertones and to recognise that the very best art and culture is for everyone; that it has the power to change people’s lives, regardless of class, education or ethnicity. It is also time to trust our artists […] to strive for what is new and exciting, rather than what is safe and comfortable. (McMaster 2008: 4)

The McMaster report draws on an extensive public consultation about the value of the public arts and priorities for public funding. This consultation built on the first National Arts and Media Strategy [NAMS] which in 1991 began to put in place the principles and practices that would secure a cultural policy formed out of cultural-democratic struggles between the 1960s and 80s. So we can say with some confidence that what came after scarcity was a sustained and thoughtful rejection of cultural values of elitism and scarcity in favour of values of participation, diversity and social inclusion. Values of use and exchange rather than ‘value as an intrinsic property of texts, objects or practices' (Frow,1995, pp.5).

Creative writing is a practice which lives and breathes value, and is a discourse which attracts strongly held value-judgements, but within the contemporary UK context, value is often a curiously absent term. Until recently, creative writing’s pedagogic practices were distinctively tacit and questions of value are similarly inexplicit. Jim McGuigan (1996) suggests that questions of value in social circulation are best treated as empirical questions, matters of research not just abstract theorising. This also holds true for questions of value in creative writing practice and pedagogy. There is a need to ask and
answer, as providers and participants, some deceptively simple questions which bear on our work with writing in education:

- What do we do, and why?
- Why do we do it this way?
- On what basis do we make individual and collective ethical and aesthetic judgements, and how do we articulate and debate them in our practice?
- How do we codify, operationalise and defend these ideas as evaluation and assessment criteria?
- How do we make dynamic links between cultural activity in adult and higher education and the wider, social world?

Answering them involves grappling with the different regimes and contexts for value produced by the intersection between cultural policy and the creative writing networks and activities which contextualise and co-construct our work in education. Value, particularly in a society colonised by market values, is quickly reduced to economic definitions: value for money, cost benefit, commercial value. This is hardly surprising for an activity which moves between subsidised arts on the one hand and commercial and professional markets on the other. Historically, within literature policy, the relationship between the art form and market has been uncomfortable. The Literature Department was established almost 20 years after the Arts Council itself because it was believed books of literary merit could be written and published without subsidy. When the Arts Council hit protracted funding problems (partly economic and partly ideological) in the 1980s the then Director of the Literature Department closed it down, arguing that the market would sustain the writing, publication and circulation of Literature.

Throughout the 1990s value became a key area of enquiry for cultural theorists tracking the displacement of ways of understanding values as autonomous, universal and absolute by theorisations of value and taste as socially constructed and reproduced (Frow, 1995; McGuigan, 1995; 1999; 2004; Wolff, 1993). At the same time as cultural theorists grappled with these issues, the challenge to values was re-presented in educational, political and media discourses as an amoral cultural free-for-all of relativism although ‘political correctness gone mad’ and ‘dumbing down’ never quite reached the intensity and high stakes of the ‘culture wars’ that raged in the USA and Australia.

There was too often awkward silence from creative writing practitioners about value in relation to the actual creative work being produced. Practitioners let the market speak for them or they developed and promoted use, exchange or gift values in place of aesthetic values. This is at its most marked in debates about creative writing in higher education, where value enters into debates about the status, nature and validation of the subject at a general level as well as more locally in arguments about appropriate forms of assessment and how to balance appropriate professional qualifications in writing and teaching. After years of debating whether one could or should teach creative writing as a degree subject in the UK, it is now firmly on a trajectory from margin to mainstream. As it makes this transition, it negotiates its own professional and pedagogic values as well as its relation to existing sets of aesthetic, commercial, ethical and use values, although it rarely does so explicitly. In the pressure to establish distinctiveness, authority and propriety, values of elitism and scarcity enter the creative writing discourse. This can be seen in the unproblematic acceptance of a hierarchy of sites and forms of creative writing activity, with higher education at the top and a story of origins in which the longer histories of creative writing in schools, in teacher training, in adult and community education, personal development and voluntary and hobbyist arts activities are obscured or reframed in various versions of ‘not real writing’.
Perhaps more invidiously, creative writing in higher education aligns itself too uncritically with English Studies, and often a particular ideological inflection of English Studies, choosing to abandon the genuinely difficult – but necessary – work of formulating an assessment regime which can value – and distinguish and differentiate within - creative, process-based achievement. Higher education based creative writing has a stake in maintaining the view that different kinds and forms of writing are inherently superior and inferior as against the view that things can be good and bad of their kind, better and worse in relation their own discursive fields. A good piece of life-story writing is not an inferior work of fiction. Protesting that creative writing is really a critical discipline, or its purpose is to develop skills of interpretation rather than the production of writers per se, seem to me to dodge rather confront the issue of specifying the multiple and variable ways in which form and context shape value and quality.

Policy contexts

Today, creative writing activities are provided, funded, participated in and valued throughout Britain on a scale that was unimaginable 40 years ago when the cultural and educational campaigns that laid their foundations; campaigns which were often sustained or initiated in adult and community education settings, were launched.

It has been argued that the Arts Council's founding imperative – to raise standards in art forms while spreading access to them as widely as possible - is fundamentally contradictory and produces a basic and recurrent, rather than single, contradiction (McGuigan, 1985, pp.29. It is possible to see the McMaster report in this way - embodying a 21st century version of a resolved but re-emerging contradiction in cultural policy. The report's three chapters sandwich the now familiar concerns with widening and engaging audiences between a less familiar concern with Excellence, Innovation and Risk-Taking and a reintroduced, but reframed, question of quality, in which self- and peer- assessment is fore-grounded. Value here has the potential to become an active – transitive -category rather than one which is fixed and canonised.

During the 1980s there was a turn towards economic values in cultural policy. Economic value entered into the discourse and practice of cultural policy in a changed form: less what the arts cost and more what income they generated. Viewing arts activity as cultural industry did not get rid of the need for subsidy but recast it as investment. Cultural activity became a lynchpin of social and economic regeneration throughout the 1990s and its trajectory seems barely diminished today. So, something else which comes after scarcity, and is often posed in opposition to its elitism, is a utilitarian or instrumental social value. Within this field of values, social use is specified across a range of situations and purposes and ascribed to reading as well as writing; consumption and production. In these activities, writing is simultaneously central and peripheral: the process and context matter but the product is both ephemeral and repetitive. Participative arts benefit the participants and the aesthetic value of art for arts sake find an inversion in participative art for the sake of participation.

This change was not without critics. P D James, as Chair of the reinstated Arts Council Literature Panel, talked about ‘a silly age of little enthusiasms. I don't understand why we concern ourselves about women in the arts, a development for this or that, disablement or ethnic minorities. Our concerns should be literature’ (Sinclair, 1995, pp.298). The NAMS was a watershed in the story of creative writing in cultural policy. It is here that the turn towards writing and away from literature, and from literature as an elite, restricted practice, was secured and institutionalised; and it was also here that educational values were most clearly invoked to manage and guarantee that turn. The emphasis on education carried the
promise that the arts would cease being a place at which the educated arrive and become instead part and parcel of everyone’s journey.

Value judgements are constitutive of literature and the work of recasting literature policy into a differently valued frame of reference was an enormous undertaking. Various strategies were adopted, including the populism signalled by the title of Violet Hughes’s report *Literature Belongs to Everyone* (Hughes, 1991) and the attempt, in NAMS to specify how different purposes for literature operate with their own different value systems (Niven, 1992). But, to the extent that there was a shift in thinking about value, it happened by incorporating educational values into mainstream cultural policy and practice rather than reformulating new regimes of value which, in the words of Janet Wolff, recognise the irreducibility of aesthetic values to social, political or ideological co-ordinates Wolff (1993). Where value is spoken about in these debates, it is almost always from a reactionary and conservative position, as if value itself was an irrelevant or tainted concept.

We can see how education became both agent and guarantor of cultural change in the way that from the late 1980s onwards education work became an important funding criterion. In 1998, the then minister for Culture, Media and Sport prioritised educational values and targets in his spending review. He talked about policy drivers in terms of promoting access, pursuing excellence and nurturing educational opportunity before setting targets of 300,000 new experiences in the arts and 200,000 new educational sessions (DCMS, 1998). The emphasis on participation recast the artistic experience as an educational one, and funding followed educational rather than aesthetic priorities. As McMaster introduces and reframes excellence it is to be hoped that we will not turn away from education but rather that the emphasis on risk, innovation and excellence will create new spaces and new imperatives for educational work of a really useful (critical) kind.

**Experiencing value in the creative writing classroom**

Questions of value are not just abstractions but situated in the experience of those who participate in and provide creative writing in education and they are lived in highly differentiated and complex ways. Popular ways of seeing creative writing in education, especially community based activities, often simplify both the value for participants of their activity and the value of work produced. There are two forms of value in circulation – commercial value, linked to the pursuit and achievement of publication, and personal, cathartic value – and they are often unhelpfully polarised. In the fieldwork that I carried out in Cleveland, UK, I was struck by the over-determination of commercial value. Writing can be immensely powerful – as an expressive and communicative medium – in making individual and social sense of experience yet, within creative writing in education, this aspect of writing was often dismissed as writing for therapy or self indulgence. Although the majority of participants in Cleveland’s culture of writing reported that publishing was not a priority for them, and few of them were actively seeking a professional career in writing, what they chose to write was often determined by commercial imperatives. An important factor in explaining this is the association of literary work with this highly individualised and expressive approach to writing, and the identification of the literary as other: an exclusive and excluding practice. Craft is set against art, writing against literature in a kind of crude reversal of the prevailing literary tradition. So, a competent but derivative twist-in-the-tale story would be considered legitimate, serious writing while work of a more personal or experimental nature would not.
Discussion of work in progress often had a very technicist focus on craft skills or potential outlets and rarely considered the writing's intended purpose or effect or its substantive or ideological content. While most groups were more subtle than the one which announced it left politics and religion at the door, most did not discuss work in these terms. If group members engaged with the emotional or intellectual impact of what they had heard discussion was often quickly curtailed – by group members as often as tutors. So, a shared and politicised experiential approach to the work, which was fundamental to the earliest writing workshops developed through the women’s movement and the federation of worker writers and community publishers that had influenced the development of these creative writing education initiatives, became detached from them. It resulted in a situation where, despite the many benefits participants reported, social transformation was unrealised because the emphasis on participation, on the value of participation as a good in and of itself, too often resulted in people being empowered to participate in profoundly uncreative, de-personalised and conformist writing activities.

When adult education was mainstreamed and accredited, questions of value and the available value regime changed again. Whereas participation had been relatively free of judgement, focusing on encouragement and privileging the writing process above the product, accreditation was judgement based and, often, text based. In the early period of introducing assessment, debates concerned the extent to which process rather than product could legitimately be captured; and whether, if it could, it should be. Was the student’s learning – about writing, about the writing process – at stake or was that learning only of value when it could be harnessed to produce a text capable of being judged against the editorial – profession and commercial – values of the industry? Is a good student one who has internalised the habits, values and judgements of professional writers who is learning to access, develop and control a creative process or one who can consistently produce competent and completed work?

Creative writing in education demonstrates a profound ambivalence about whether or not its purpose is to produce writers and / or writing, and for adult educators working in HE this ambivalence came to the fore when internal restructuring meant that part-time adult students not only now studied alongside, but were often outnumbered by, full-time traditional age students. These students bring something else to the mix of values in play – more often than not their relation to creative writing is touristic; they are not living the writing in the way in which adult students are – and they usually have a very well developed critical grasp of literary style, genre and judgement based on A level or 1st year UG study in the arts but which they cannot reproduce in their own creative work. Where these students come from non-arts based disciplines they are sometimes refreshingly free of these frames of reference but often they are aware of and intimidated by them even when they are not part of their disciplinary apprenticeship. Where adult education was once able to provide forms of social and cultural association that enabled individuals and groups to access and develop forms of cultural activity on the basis of need, interest and use they now have to work within a framework driven by individual progress. One consequence of this is that adult educators can struggle to provide an infrastructure for collective cultural activity and their work threatens to become 'system' - regulation, imposition and conformity; rather than lifeworld - the areas of renewal, creativity and critical insight (Habermas, 984).

Conscious critical pedagogy weights their practice in favour of lifeworld, albeit in smaller, sometimes fragmented, spaces of social relationship and transformative learning. At its heart is the need not just to deconstruct and reconstruct ‘good’ writing as part of their work but also to teach the value of participation. Recently, we have introduced participation criteria into the assessment framework for creative writing at Leeds, alongside criteria
which recognise and reward critical reflection, conscious control of the writing process, writing genres and techniques and awareness of authorship and audience. Ten years ago, we might have done this in order to give credit for – to value – the work and motivation of adult students; today, it is a mean of encouraging all students to engage in the collective and social processes of creative writing from which we believe good writing, and good writers, develop. But more than this, in the highly alienated and commoditised world of mass higher education, creative writing in education can provide space for sanctuary and play, for pleasure and steep learning; space to explore diversity on and off the page; space for important intergenerational learning to happen through and about writing. A class holds its breath as a 30 year old woman, heavily pregnant with her first child, reads to us the harrowing story of the circumstance leading to her father’s suicide in Broadmoor, an experience she has previously never spoken about to anyone. Another class holds its breath as an 18 year old boy speaks in class for the first time, racing through a self-deprecating funny story about failing to be admitted to a nightclub and getting arrested. Humanist values? Yes, but an all too rare space where active critical contestation can generate new perspectives on identity and belonging; where the writing – as process and product, and the exchanges of and through writing – moves dialectically from foreground to background. The 2006 Public Value and the Arts Debate shows the polarities between instrumentalism and intrinsic value for the arts being handled with great subtlety. A more nuanced value regime is not only proposed, but shown to be lived and understood by artists, art workers and administrators and the general public (Bunting, 2007, pp.6-15). It is time to incorporate this expanded concept of value into the design and evaluation of courses and assessment tasks

References


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