Two fun pieces on Poetry Workshops, followed by a serious inquiry into why do them

(linking to the debate on 'Can you teach Creative Writing, especially Poetry?' in the double New Generation Poets issue of Agenda, Vol 49 Mos 3-4)

Peter Carpenter on Poetry Workshops

Armitage and I

a found poem, for Richard Evans

After the workshop we dine on pike and apricot sorbet, followed by slabs of brie on sour dough crusts. Satisfied with our work and the rapid progress

of our student group we take the air, negotiating the incline down to the lake that glistered under a gibbous moon. (Delete 'gibbous' from the final draft,

we mutter into musketeer beards.) Armitage is all for stripping off, doing a Byron in Venice, soft-treading the brine and ooze along

the Grand Canal during the *Carnivale*. When he calms down we work instead on stoppering a first draft of night-air, high as kites on downed Black Widows.

Workshop

- 1. Begin writing. Two minutes, without stopping, anything that comes into your head.
- 2. Locate obligatory maniac in group. Write, without stopping, about maniac.
- 3. Show religious tolerance when deaf Methodist informs rest of group that 'none of this is really poetry'. Fix grin, move on. File away for future reference.
- 4. Steal things which stick in your head like 'spit-grilled fish' and 'a well-laid table of fields'.
- 5. Catch breath at dawn workshop of sun and shadow. See faces in the wood.
- 6. Wonder at two a.m. moths that cuff an exterior light. Sip a tad more house white.
- 7. Contribute to anthology of faces, hands, gestures. Sense life-histories easing themselves free.
- 8. Miss them/it. Fail to erase maniac from memory banks.
- 9. Remember the session on doors. Visualise one. Write down the word 'door'. Leave it there until it opens out into something.
- 10. Underline any of the above if it rings true.

Begin writing again, for two minutes, without stepping, yes, by yourself this time. The first thing that comes into your head. Don't analyse, don't get all defensive.

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Thirteen Ways of Looking at a First Degree in Creative Writing

I've always wanted to be a writer. During my last years at school and studying French and linguistics at Oxford University in the nineties, the careers advice was to become a journalist. It is great that a career in creative writing is now an option. Given different possibilities then, I might not have become a journalist. But given the chance to re-choose my first degree, I still wouldn't opt for an honours in creative writing.

The reasons:

1. Do you need to do it now?

A plethora of creative writing courses make it very easy to pick up these skills and tuition at a later date. (I did a CertHE in creative writing with Birmingham University and an online MA in poetry with Manchester Writing School.) Courses can also be found outside of universities. But the lectures and learning of my first degree course would be much harder to pick up another way, even with the emergence of massive open online courses. Study in the sciences, where you need access to labs, and I suspect these would be even more difficult to access if not as a first degree.

2. What do you want to get from a degree?

Learning, enjoyment, qualification and career options are a few reasons for doing a degree. If your most important motivations are the first reasons alone, then why not choose creative writing. However, if career options are your goal, it's worth asking what such a degree would give you over other degrees. Unlike many subjects in academia, even those teaching creative writing don't need a first degree in it, in some cases not even a masters or PhD. A different first degree might offer a wider range of career opportunities.

3. Isn't reading better than writing anyway?

Reading is a more indirect way of picking up writing skills. A literature course will not only introduce you to a wide range of texts but, in giving you the skills to critically analyse them, should enable you to analyse any text for techniques which you can then use in your own writing.

4. But what will you have to write about?

All poetry and no life makes Jack a dull poet. If the whole focus of your life is creative writing, you may be narrowing the range of things you have to write about. Doing a French degree gave me the knowledge for writing *The Magnetic Diaries*, a narrative in poems loosely based on a modern version of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

Motivation may also be different. I wrote more prolifically when I had young children than on my Masters because I felt I had to make the most of each available moment. William Carlos Williams's jotting notes for poems on his doctor's pad is now poetic legend. Would he have written as much or as well if he had all the time in the world to do it and no other focus?

5. What if my interests or needs change?

Dreams aren't always possible, they may change or they may turn out to be not what you actually want. Transferable skills that can be used in a wide range of settings are something to look for in any degree.

6. Why not creative writing modules on a different degree instead of a full degree in creative writing?

All of the points above lead to this question.

7. How can a marker avoid subjectivity?

This is something that probably applies to any arts subject more than the sciences. Universities will have guidelines, but a creative response is likely to involve more subjectivity/interpretation by the marker than a more formulaic essay.

8. Do you have the confidence?

This is important, to deal with the effects of point 7. Workshopping and peer critique can be hard to bounce back from at any point but when you add in pressure of marks riding on the whole process... I found the multiple voices and often conflicting opinions of university workshopping hard at 35, and confidence is something that has grown greatly for me over the years.

9. Doesn't formal training run the risk of placing writers in the box rather than out of it?

I suspect the answer is yes, no, and depends on the writer.

Yes, in writing to get a good grade, there will probably be boxes one has to tick.

There again, it could be argued that writing to please a tutor/marker is not so very different from the general skill of writing to please a particular editor or audience. And all courses only last a certain amount of time, after which you can jump back out of the box.

10. Creative writing degree or a mentor?

If there is a particular writer you want to learn from, then it may be a creative writing degree is the way to access this. But it is worth double-checking that this might not be available outside of university as a mentorship. It is also worth checking exactly how much and what sort of contact time you would really get with that specific writer as part of your course. One of the plus sides of university over mentorship is that you will probably get a wider range of perspectives from a team of writers and a formal structure of how and what teaching should be given. But university teaching from a specific tutor may not be guaranteed and may mostly be in large groups, not one-to-one.

11 Surely, there's no surer way to kill a love than studying it every day?

This question – which could be subtitled 'too much of a good thing' – is obviously debatable as a statement, but it is worth considering. Ask many adults who think they don't like poetry why they don't like it, and many will say that it's because of school. This may partly be down to the way it was taught, but also perhaps to over-studying. Done every day and in great detail, things which were once creative, exciting and challenging may become habitual and unstimulating.

12 Will knowing a lot more than the 'average reader' distort your ability to guess what average readers will want or like in your work?

This would be highly debatable as a statement, and the notion of an average reader is tricky, but there is a grain of important thought behind the question.

I'm assuming that often most of us don't write poetry for a target reader as such, at least not in the early drafts and when responding to inspiration rather than writing for a commission. The chances are, then, that at an unconscious level we are writing for ourselves or a reader not hugely unlike us. If you've learned a lot and read a lot, this may mean you have easy understanding of references and ideas that may be problematic for those meeting them for the first time. (To put it another way if you're a literary rocket scientist, when trying to engage with some readers, you may have to actively work to remember back to how it was first trying to grasp high school physics.)

Of course, arguably, this is what feedback and redrafting are there for – the former to flag up such issues and the latter to find the right way of tackling them, perhaps now with a more specific reader in mind.

13 What if the creative writing career options available now dry up in the future?

As my own experiences outlined in the introduction show, things change. Just as the past decades' changes had a big impact on options available to writers now, the decades to come may mean some of these new opportunities close, more and different ones may open. Transferable skills and the ability to adapt fast are probably the two most important things to hone, within and outside of the writing world.