

**ASIA CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAMME RESEARCH PROJECT:
TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING IN SINGAPORE**

4 January 2023

INTRODUCTION

Akhil Sharma was a Visiting Writer from 4 August 2022 to 3 January 2023 under the Asia Creative Writing Programme, a collaboration between the School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University and the National Arts Council, Singapore.

During his residency Akhil presented two workshop series on Creative Non-Fiction and Advanced Short Stories, held numerous mentor and consultation sessions with students, participated on a panel and presented two readings of students' work at the 2022 Singapore Writers Festival.

This research paper presents Akhil's insights into teaching creative writing in Singapore during his residency. Akhil also held discussions with Associate Professors Barrie Sherwood, Boey Kim Cheng and Dr Balli Kaur Jaswal for the purposes of the paper. The paper was presented on 17 December 2022 at a public session to an audience of creative writing teachers and students. Presentations were also given by experienced writers and creative writing teachers, Desmond Kon and Yeo Wei Wei.

The Programme sees this paper and the successful sharing session on 17 December 2022 as the start of an ongoing conversation on creative writing pedagogy to be held periodically with Visiting Writers and the Singapore community of creative writing educators and writing students facilitated by the Programme and the School of Humanities at Nanyang Technological University.

TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING IN SINGAPORE

By Akhil Sharma

Presented at OneNorth, Buona Vista, Singapore on 17 December 2022

WHAT DO WE TEACH AND HOW DO WE TEACH IT?

The first question we have to ask ourselves is what do we as creative writing teachers teach that literature teachers do not?

The answer, I think, is simple. We teach how sentences generate effects and why a writer might choose to use or not use a certain effect. Here is one example:

I am a sick man.... I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. My liver hurts. However, I know nothing at all about livers, and do not know for certain what ails me. I don't consult a doctor for it, and never have, though I have a respect for medicine and doctors. Besides, I am extremely superstitious, sufficiently so to respect medicine, anyway (I am well-educated enough not to be superstitious, but I am superstitious). No, I refuse to consult a doctor from spite. That you probably will not understand. Well, I understand it, though. Of course, I can't explain who it is precisely that I am mortifying in this case by my spite: I am perfectly well aware that I cannot "pay out" the doctors by not consulting them; I know better than anyone that by all this I am only injuring myself and no one else. But still, if I don't consult a doctor it is from spite. My liver is bad, well—let it get worse!

This is the opening paragraph of *Notes From the Underground*. When this work is taught in literature courses, one of the basic things that a teacher does is place the novella in its historical context: what were the works that Dostoevsky was responding to, what was the vision of rationality that he found unconvincing.

For the creative writing professor, the focus is instead on what is the effect that the sentences are generating or apparently failing to generate. For example, the unknown speaker of

the paragraph seems to be an absurd hypochondriac. There is plenty of reason to laugh at the paragraph. Most first time readers do not, however. The creative writing teacher will first try to show that the paragraph is funny. She will then show that a paragraph break after the fourth sentence would make the humor more obvious. She will then ask why Dostoevsky seems to step on his own joke?

We as creative writing teachers are focused on sentences and only incidentally on context and extra-literary meaning.

The second question we have to ask is: what is the difference in methodology between how we teach and how literature professors teach?

We teach in two basic ways. We teach by reading the works of masters and discussing them. This is in many ways no different from how literature professors teach, though what we hope to extract from these texts is very different.

The second way we teach is by asking students to make their own texts which deploy some of the same strategies as the writers that they are reading. The students learn by doing. One way to think of the purpose of this type of teaching is by comparing it to playing tennis. Creative writing teachers are helping students make shots. They are helping them to develop a sense of the court. When students then later talk about books, they will have a muscle memory of the way language “makes” and sometimes fails to “make”. To me, and this is just my opinion, literature professors who have not written creatively themselves, are like sports commentators who have not played the sport they are describing.

Often it is the “workshop” element of creative writing classes which people view as distinctive about the teaching of creative writing (a workshop is when a student submits a piece of writing and receives comments from the class and the professor). There is the belief that the

student learns from having her work commented on. This, in my opinion, is not completely accurate.

While a student learns something from having her work discussed, most students find it actually hard to hear what is being said about their work. No matter how carefully praise and criticism is calibrated, students tend to shut down to what is being said.

The writing aspect of a creative writing class helps the student in two ways.

One, it gives the student deadlines to produce. Most students, even very disciplined ones, find that they make their writing a lower priority than all the other things that they need to do. Deadlines force students to produce, and just producing, whether what they produce is good or bad, teaches them the texture of language.

The second way that students learn is that they are asked to look at what is working and not working in other people's stories. They see that most students make the same mistakes over and over. They learn to name problems. Does the dialogue sound like people talking? Are the characters distinct enough that their actions and responses are legible to the reader? Do things feel hurried in some places and too slow in others/ This naming of problems in other people's stories can then generate self-awareness about the same problems being present in the student's own writing. Again, I want to emphasize that students learn more from other people's mistakes than they do from hearing their own works critiqued.

A last thing needs to be mentioned and this is a side-effect of creative writing workshops and not necessarily a goal.

Many students wish to write because there is something internally that they are grappling with. For many students, what they write is a way to make sense of the world. For many others it

is a way of taking a piece of their internal life outside themselves so they can look at it clearly. For still others, it is a way of saying to the world: I exist!

Creative writing workshops are very intimate environments. I have had students reveal things that they are ashamed or confused about. One student wrote about how her mother would give her virginity tests. Another student wrote about his father who was a gambler. Workshops allow students to see that while their problems might be different, their feelings are the same: shame, guilt, feelings of inadequacy, love of flawed human beings.

Workshops can lead to self-acceptance. This in turn leads to better writing.

If we were to look at the opening paragraph of *Notes From the Underground* again, we see that what Dostoevsky is providing is a vision of self-blindness. The narrator knows himself and also does not. The narrator knows that he has certain flaws, but doesn't know how to escape them. Dostoevsky is providing us both a vision of consciousness and how consciousness is a trap.

HOW TO TEACH A WORKSHOP

GENERAL THOUGHTS

The reality of workshops is that most teachers at elite institutions are hired for their fame and not necessarily because they are great teachers. A friend of mine at Stanford said, "The first thing we look at is fame. The second thing we look at is whether the person will be a good colleague. Will he or she do committee work and not be annoying. The last thing we look at is genuine merit." Notice that teaching does not make it onto the list.

Another basic truth is that teaching is a performance and the performance that is most effective is the performance that is most true to the performer. This means that one set of rules does not and cannot work for every teacher.

Finally, there are institutional constraints based on the required size of a workshop and whether or not students are graded.

Let me now share my experience with the important caveat that this is just my experience.

I have taught creative writing at Rutgers, Princeton, Duke, and at a number of elite summer workshops such as Breadloaf. I have taught undergraduates and graduate students. I have taught adults in their forties and fifties. I have taught people writing novels and people writing short stories.

What I have learned from doing all this is that it is really the student who is teaching herself, and all I am doing is providing a little bit of guidance. I am almost like someone spotting at the gym, asking: is this the best angle to lift at? Beginning with this level of humility will help the teacher and will let the student know that the teacher is limited in what she can provide.

In some ways it is the structure of the workshop that is creating opportunities for learning. What I mean by this is that the student is learning as much from how deadlines force the student to write as much as she is from my pearls of wisdom. The student is learning as much from hearing her fellow students articulate problems in other people's stories as she is in getting her own work critiqued.

If the role of the teacher is this small, and I want to repeat that it might not be, it is the structural nature of students gathering together for discussion and exercises that is most

important. The focus in terms of teaching should therefore be how to magnify the power of workshops and not necessarily to say wiser or more insightful things.

Among the ways that I have tried to help my students is by simply having them write more. I regularly assign students daily writing exercises. Among other things, I have asked students to practice rarely used literary devices like apostrophe or onomatopoeia. I have had students copy down dialogue that they overhear in canteens and coffeeshops so they get a sense of how little people actually listen to each other. Having students do this every day is a bit like getting a tennis player to hit balls every day.

The truth, though, is that this is still far from learning how to tell a story. In the same way that hitting a tennis ball is not the same as playing a game of tennis, these exercises do not reveal the dynamic reality of a story. As with exercises that help develop particular strengths, the more stories a student writes, the more likely they are to become familiar with what a story requires. The challenge with having students write a lot of stories is primarily the size of the workshop. Other than at NTU, I have taught classes that range in size from six students to twelve. Six, in my opinion, is too small for a diversity of opinions, and twelve might be too many. If one has ten students, it is possible to workshop three students a class and this way each student is getting her work discussed relatively frequently. The value of having students workshopped often is that they remain more engaged. If they are only getting workshopped once or twice a semester, they tune out.

The big benefit of having students engaged is that it is possible to have them write stories which are not directly discussed in workshop. For example, I actually ask all my undergraduate students to write a story every week. I then ask these to be posted online and I have the students comment on each story. Only a few of the students are actually discussed in class, but because

the students know that they will be discussed soon, they tend to work hard even on those stories that will not be discussed in class.

If the students are only getting discussed once or twice a semester, they do not work as energetically as they do when they are getting workshopped frequently.

Another major factor in teaching creative writing is whether the class is graded. My experience is that if students are getting graded, they tend to be less daring. At Princeton the classes are pass/fail. At Rutgers and Duke I was able to give all my students A's.

GETTING STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE

Every workshop can be full of silence. If the silence drags on, the teacher often experiences a sense of panic.

Traditionally, the students whose stories are being workshopped do not speak. They are expected to only listen. Their silence can, however, be interpreted by other students as silent suffering.

Over the last decade or so, some teachers have begun inviting students to speak before their work gets discussed. They can talk about what they are especially happy with in the story. What they are worried about. What problem they keep finding themselves getting into. The goal of their talking is partially to let the other students know that they want help and that they know their story is not perfect. This permission encourages students to speak and offer criticism.

A second way to get students to speak is by offering them certain criteria which often serve as a measure of quality. These criteria can include: does the dialogue sound like how people speak; is the physical world legible; are the characters behaving in a manner which is

both realistic and unexpected? The discussion is then lead along these questions. The goal with these criteria is to standardize discussions and focus attention on certain clear technical issues.

This device does not mean that all stories are the same and can be judged in the same manner. It does, however, mean that students are to some extent alienated from the idea of each story being ineffably itself. A story is made simply into an experience generating machine.

Another part of having students participate is having them feel safe with their teacher. Since the teacher in a workshop usually speaks last, and since the teacher is the most experienced member of the workshop, her words carry great weight.

The teacher is usually also the honest broker in the discussion. The teacher is the one who usually asks the most challenging questions since her role is to push the student into growth.

One way this great weight can be managed is by having the teacher meet with the students who are about to be workshopped ahead of class. This means that these students can approach with some amount of worry already removed. Their relaxation can also cause the other students to relax.

A second way that a teacher can de-stress students is meeting with them outside class. Just getting to know the teacher as a human being often causes the students to feel warmth for the concern shown. This can remove the sting even from challenging statements.

SUGGESTIONS ABOUT GRADUATE STUDENTS

Up to now, I have spoken only about students in general. I think there is some need to discuss graduate students specifically.

Most undergraduate students are not hoping to become professional writers or teachers of creative writing. Most graduate students are, however, hoping for this. The stakes for them feel

higher and therefore the anxiety that a class contains is greater. When a teacher says to them that learning to write is a long term process, they sometimes take it as an insult. Graduate students also often spend as much time thinking about agents and publication as they do about sentences and story architecture.

The anxiety graduate students experience is sometimes so great that they are actually unwilling to experiment. They have the sense that if they experiment, they will be admitting that they don't know what they are doing and this will make clear that the goal of being a successful author is even further away than they imagine.

With graduate students, there is an even greater need to be available and humble. Over and over one has to admit, "I don't have an answer," or instead, "The answer that I have found for myself might not be the right one for you."

The teaching of graduate students is much more fraught than the teaching of undergraduates. In some ways, it might be helpful for every graduate program to require students to just do exercises. If they really wish to become successful writers, they need to learn how good one has to be to be any good at all.

SINGAPORE SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS

- (1) Even graduate students often slip into Singlish. These are excellent students who are well read and intelligent. The English that they write, however, feels very specific to Singapore. My advice is that this should be seen as a strength and not as a weakness. The more local and specific one can make a work, the more universal it usually is. By this, I do not mean that all stories should be about people working at hawker stands. I

- just mean that there shouldn't be any shyness about local subjects and language. After all, if there are specific problems, an editor can usually find a way around them.
- (2) Shyness with discussing intimate items. For no doubt multiple reasons, many students shy away from writing about the unattractive aspects of their characters. If a teacher can do so, it would probably be worth while to encourage bravery in students. This might involve revealing one's own petty jealousies or shames. The teacher can, however, teach by the bravery of her examples.
- (3) There is an enormous amount of literary talent in Singapore. Because the Singapore market is small and the prizes available in Singapore are small, it would be worthwhile for students to try to immerse themselves in the international literary marketplace. By this, I mean not just reading magazines like *Granta* or *The Paris Review*, but submitting stories to them. The unfortunate truth is that for Singaporean writers to support themselves as writers, their easiest path might be earning international acclaim just because the international market is so much larger than the Singaporean one.
- (4) Read Singaporean literature. In the west there is a great deal of emphasis placed on reading writers from diverse communities. While this is valuable and worth doing, I find that it is emotionally helpful to feel that one is part of a very specific literary world. Knowing how other writers are grappling with the issues that you are grappling with is helpful. But even more than this, when one sees other writers, especially writers one admires, this can give courage. And in the end no writer can survive without courage.