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Transforming texts: learning to become a (creative) writer through reading

Writing is not entirely contained in the envelope of experience, native thought, and personal motivation to communicate (Bazerman).

Introduction and Review of the Literature

The issue of the role and potential benefits of reading in relation to the production of (creative) writing is not new and can be traced back to the disciplinary origins of Creative Writing in the United States. As Dawson (2005) points out, the idea of reading from the inside, that is, “the practice of writing as a means of developing literary appreciation and critical skills” (Dawson, 2005: 71) was already a feature of the New Humanism of the 1940s. What is, perhaps, new today is the question of how and what to read and whether this should be approached from an arguably narrow disciplinary base with a focus on technique or whether the matter and material of the reading-writing dynamic should be more broadly conceived and interpreted. As McCaw (2011: 28) indicates, “the benefits of reading for writers depends (sic) on precisely what *sort* of reading we are actually talking about”. In an article that is critical of a narrowly construed view of close reading within a closed disciplinary frame, McCaw (2011: 28) goes on to argue that it is necessary to bridge:

the gap between functional interpretation and the more expansive forms of textual interpretation that are likely to further students’ understanding and appreciation of how writing works and what being a writer means within the context of a wider culture.

This call for a re-consideration of the modes and purposes of reading in relation to the development of a Creative Writing curriculum which encourages critical thinking as well as creative evaluation, combining knowledge/s with know-how, is already implicit in Harper’s (2010) treatment of the relationship between Creative Writing and reading outlined in his recent book, *On Creative Writing*, where he explicitly asks:

What kinds, what modes of reading and, most importantly, *what reading* needs to inform that consideration (Harper, 2010: 25)?

Harper poses these questions in the context of a work which aims to consider the acts and actions of Creative Writing both in relation to process and to product. Rather than focus solely on what may or may not be finished products or artefacts made available through publication or dissemination, Harper is concerned with the various activities of creative writers as they engage with what he calls pre-working, complementary working, final works and post works. By shifting the focus away from finished works to Creative Writing as a set of activities, some of which may lead to the production of a final work, Harper is intentionally broadening the scope of Creative Writing which he sees as an ongoing set of inter-related activities, involving “the operation of perception and conception” (Harper, 2010: 28).

For Harper, creative writers “live lives devoted to incompleteness” (30) insofar as they spend much of their time “perceiving and conceiving of works that may, at some point, become final artefacts of Creative Writing” (28). In this connection, it is interesting to note the sense of uncertainty and incompleteness registered by the participants in Sarrimo’s 2010 qualitative study of the perceptions of teachers and students of Creative Writing at an institution in Sweden. Although alternatively frustrating and exhilarating, it is in the course of this indeterminate journey that writers may “perceive of other things that have a symbiotic relationship with their Creative Writing, and they also conceive pieces of writing that work in complementary, supportive or obliquely connected ways with their core acts and actions” (Harper, 2010: 28). Harper points to the fact that creative writers draw on what he calls past workings, which he locates under the category of ‘memory’, be it their own past workings or memories of the past or the past work of other writers, which they read, discern, interpret and attempt to comprehend (Harper, 2010: 28).

The role of reading in these activities is likely to be relatively fluid given Harper’s wide understanding of what reading means and the fact that creative writers may well be engaged in more than one project at any given time.

The word ‘reading’ means, broadly, ‘examining meaning’. It relates to receiving and sometimes, often, with every good will, comprehending. It can mean to gain knowledge from something, to examine and decide upon intention. It’s about discerning, attempting to grasp, interpreting (Harper, 2010: 25).

Harper recognizes that creative writers are often drawn to the finished works of other creative writers for a variety of purposes such as looking for “material evidence of their own desired results” (25) as well as seeking points of comparison and drawing on “shared ideas and ideals” (25). However, this activity of reading may not be limited to the works of other writers, as Harper acknowledges, but may involve reading all sorts of other things: faces, situations, newspaper articles, websites, television shows. In other words, as Harper remarks elsewhere (Harper, 2008) in relation to the kinds of knowledge and understanding which creative writers may bring to and demonstrate in their work, they not only draw on “whatever fields of structured knowledge that exist around them” but also on “vast areas of unstructured knowledge in ways that defy any university structuring” (Harper 2008).

In this, he is pointing to the flexibility required in creating the conditions of possibility for the work of creative writers as they read past workings in the light of present contingencies, all the while anticipating the production of new pieces. Such a dual focus on memory and anticipation is characteristic of reading and writing practices more generally, insofar as they depend on an ability to construct meaning across stretches of discourse, to draw on what has been in the making of what is yet to come. Creative writers are not alone in “enter[ing] into an unconscious or conscious dialogue with what has already been written and experienced” (Sarrimo, 2010: 186) and using this as a jumping off point for the creation of something different, something new. Arguably, all writers are responding, albeit in different ways and

according to particular generic, disciplinary, social and cultural conventions to what has gone before and trying to create a new textual entity from the absorption and transformation of other texts (Kristeva, 1986). It is in this sense that context is important, to see reading “as an interaction between individual, culture and text” (McCaw, 2011: 29). The question of what gets read and how needs to be seen, therefore, in relation not only to the contexts in which writing takes place but also relative to the perceptions, purposes and motivations of the individual writer. If, as McCaw (2011: 32) suggests, “the words on the page are but the first step in a wider cultural interaction”, then a reading which encourages relating text to (interpretative, disciplinary and social) context is likely to be of greater value than a narrowly formal or instrumental one. At the same time, if, as the evidence appears to suggest, creative writers tend to read differently from students of English Literature (Harper, 2008), how can Creative Writing curricula take account of different reading practices and/or differing human and epistemological dispositions while providing opportunities for enhanced (creative) practice?

It is important to bear in mind, however, that the question of modes or modalities of reading, indeed the whole question of the nature of the relationship between reading and writing is one which has been of interest beyond the confines of the Creative Writing classroom or workshop and has a venerable history in Writing Research more generally, including Rhetoric and Composition. My aim in this paper is not to rehearse a history of reading in relation to writing research but to point to the context out of which the present researcher’s interest in the reading-writing complex emerged and to take a sounding of student views at a specific institution at a particular cultural moment. By cultural moment, I mean to point to the increasing popularity of Creative Writing among a wide range of students in the United Kingdom, many of whom are drawn to the subject because of its perceived focus on the personal and subjective and on lived as well as imagined experience.

As Juzwik et al.’s 2006 survey article reviewing research on writing over a six-year period from 1999 to 2004 makes clear, there tend to be trends in the focus of research over particular periods and in the preferred methodologies employed in the conduct of that research. Focussing on data-driven articles and those which related to a particular dimension of writing, including the reading-writing nexus, they found that there was a preference during this time for contextual studies of writing as attention to the cognitive processes of individual writers gave way to “a counter-revolutionary turn to the social” (Juzwik et al, 2006: 456). The writing of bilingual and multilingual writers was also a focus of research at this time, as were issues relating to writing instruction. However, less attention was directed in the research to what they call relationships among literacy modalities including connections between reading and writing; and the visual and the verbal. There had also been surprisingly little attention devoted to technologies of writing during this time. In terms of methodologies employed and populations studied, they noted a preference for

interpretive methods, including the use of discourse analysis, interviews and focus or discussion groups, and for looking at the writing of post-secondary students.

In terms of the interest and focus of the present study, it is instructive to note that it, too, is a contextual study insofar as it represents the experience of a particular group of students located at a named British university as they negotiate the challenges and constraints of writing within a particular institutional and disciplinary setting in response to a particular construct of Creative Writing, that is, one that sees all writing as potentially creative, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on genre and purpose as well as on access to linguistic and cultural resources. The present study also fits within 'literacy modalities' to the extent that it is concerned with exploring the interface and possible impact of reading on writing, especially in relation to notions of translation (in a broad sense), transformation and transposition. It should be noted, however, that this study is not concerned with reading per se but rather with aspects of the reading-writing interface and with intertextuality (again in a broad sense). To be clear, the locus of interest is less textual and more perceptual, that is to say, it is concerned with exploring student perceptions of, and beliefs about, what is involved in the process of creative writing or writing creatively at the end of a course of study involving a particular 'take' on Creative Writing. The results should be considered exploratory and speculative. Nevertheless, they can be seen to shed some additional light on writing process in relation to beliefs about writing and its relationship to reading in the context of a course of study whose focus was on creativity as something grounded in particular types of material resource (e.g. language/s and culture/s) and successful deployment of genre/s in accordance with the writer's purpose and aspirations as well as reader expectation and evaluation. For, as Juzwik et al (2006: 470) make clear: "If writing researchers examine and conceptualize writing as an activity involving meaning negotiation (e.g. among persons, texts, and contexts), then interpretation is essential to the work of writing research".

This is the background against which I wish to explore relationships between reading and writing both as they are inscribed in the design and implementation of a level 3/level M year-long module¹ (or course of study) in Creative Writing and Professional Practice at the University of Surrey -- a medium-sized British university in the South East of England -- and as perceived and experienced by students enrolled on the module in their responses to a short questionnaire comprising both closed and open items. The researcher had a clear investment in the module insofar as she was responsible for its design as well as for the provision of course materials and

¹ A module is a prescribed course of study at undergraduate or postgraduate level. Its duration depends on its weighting in terms of the number of credits students gain from its study and on its intensity in relation to the number of hours of study it entails. The module or course of study under discussion ran for a full academic year from October to May and consisted of a two-hour block of class time per week. The credit weighting was 40 credits, where 360 credits are required to graduate with an undergraduate degree. However, this third-year undergraduate module was also available as a package of options at postgraduate level on a taught Masters programme in Translation but was offered for less credit (30 credits rather than 40).

instruction. However, research on student perceptions and evaluation of their course of study in relation to their goals and expectations as well as in relation to their conceptions of the reading-writing dynamic and notions of creativity was conducted after the teacher-researcher had left for another institution. In this sense, the data collected might be considered as more likely to reflect students' actual and considered views, given that there was nothing directly to be gained (or lost) by them in returning the questionnaires.

Context of Situation and Methodology

Creative Writing and Professional Practice is a year-long, 40 credit unit module at the University of Surrey which forms part of the Creative Writing Pathway, a compulsory part of the BA degree for undergraduate students of English Literature with Creative Writing; and Film Studies with Creative Writing. It is also available as an option to level 3² undergraduate students of English Literature, to students of Media Studies and to Masters' level students of Translation Studies in a 30-credit unit version. The material content and assessment regime for both versions of the module are the same, as are the aims and outcomes.

Building on Creative Writing modules at levels 1 and 2, which focussed on writing across and within professional contexts, *Creative Writing and Professional Practice* aims to provide a narrative frame for textual production in a variety of contexts according to student interest. Semester 1 focussed on narrative theory and analysis with a view to providing students with a conceptual and analytic framework for production. The underlying rationale was that by studying examples of narrative texts in the context of theories of narrative students would have the opportunity to develop a critical vocabulary or terminology which would allow them to frame their insights and evaluations in appropriate academic discourse. At the same time, they would be learning about the craft of narrative in relation to a variety of professional contexts (film, media, literature and audio description). Semester 2 focussed on (narrative) text production in the context of specific elements of narrative construction such as representing time or translating space and representing place. Indeed the concept of translation, embedded in the module as a whole, operated as a kind of explicit metaphor for writing in semester 2. The module also tried to create a sense of the complementarity of the critical and creative impulses and to emphasize the necessity of reading as an active process of engagement with text, with the reader as co-constructor, and writing as a response to the reading of text in a broad sense.

The learning outcomes of the module reflected its dual function of developing a theoretical and critical frame for creative practice and emphasized the need for students to:

- demonstrate understanding of the relationship between critical and creative practices

² Level 3 refers to the final year of study of a three-year Bachelor of Arts degree.

- show familiarity with a range of narrative practices and perspectives
- engage in reasoned critical analysis of published texts and of their own texts
- produce a range of texts, deemed fit for purpose, in response to particular briefs in specific professional and creative contexts

The assessment regime reflected the dual or dynamic concerns of the module and required students to produce a critical commentary of 2,500 words on a narrative text of their choice; a portfolio of creative writing containing three short pieces (approx. 800 words per piece); and a reflective narrative of 2,000 words on the student's own Creative Writing. The marks were weighted accordingly, giving 50% to the portfolio of Creative Writing, 30% to the critical commentary and 20% to the student's own reflective narrative.

While particular aims and outcomes were explicitly inscribed in the module handbook and key readings were assigned to every session, it cannot be assumed that tutor expectations and student perceptions and experiences were necessarily in alignment. As has been stated, the tutor, or teacher-researcher in this case, had designed the module according to a model of Creative Writing which placed text production in the context of responsiveness to textual analysis and interpretation and emphasized links between the critical and the creative. What was of particular interest were the perceptions of the reading-writing dynamic of a cohort of students, many of whom had chosen Creative Writing as a named pathway on their degree programme, with a view to determining the extent of the 'match' between tutor beliefs and preferences, as inscribed in the design and implementation of the module, and student views, as articulated in a short questionnaire. The questionnaire, a copy of which is available in Appendix 1, was composed of both closed and open questions and designed to be completed relatively easily and quickly to encourage a good rate of return. It was divided into two main sections, the first comprising a series of ten statements which participants had to rate in terms of levels of agreement and disagreement. The second section was made up of three open questions which invited student responses and reactions. Some introductory personal information was collected relating to age, degree programme, gender and access to languages other than English. This was with a view to exploring any possible differences of opinion across degree programmes and to reviewing any potential gender or cultural differences.

For the purposes of this article and taking account of the broader context in which my interest has been inscribed, I intend to focus discussion on the qualitative part of the questionnaire which provided students with an opportunity to respond to three open questions relating to the reading-writing dynamic. Responses to the closed section, while interesting, cannot be seen to be conclusive given the small sample and relatively low response rate (14/34). Nevertheless, taken in conjunction with responses to the open questions, they do provide some evidence of a commitment on the part of this sample of students to reading as a source of ideas and a model in terms of craft for the students' own creative production. I shall begin by referring in

summary form to the results of Section 1 before turning to analysis and discussion of student responses to Section 2 of the questionnaire, composed of three open questions, as they serve to throw additional light on modes of reading in relation to writing and on purposes and motivations among this particular student population. The concluding remarks will also seek to take account of the results of Section 1.

Analysis of Qualitative Data and Discussion

As indicated, a response rate of 41.2% (14/34) was achieved by the deadline for return of the completed questionnaires. The respondents came from a variety of disciplines (Table 1) with the majority studying English Literature or English Literature with Creative Writing (8). The remainder were equally dispersed among Film Studies with CW (2), Media Studies (2) and Translation Studies (2). It is worth noting that 8 of the respondents (or 57%) were students whose programmes (English Literature with CW and Film Studies with CW) included the CW Pathway as a compulsory part of the named degree and who therefore could be seen to have a strong commitment to Creative Writing. While the respondents' ages (Table 2) ranged in actuality from 20-35, 10 out of the 12 students at BA level were between 20 and 23 years of age, as might be expected in the final year of an undergraduate programme. The 2 mature students (26 and 35) were enrolled on the BA in English Literature with CW. There were also more female than male respondents (Table 3) in the survey with 36% M and 64% F. The linguistic profile of the respondents (Table 4) included 5 out of 14 or 36% who had access to languages other than English. While students on an MA in Translation Studies programme might be expected to be bi- or multilingual, access to more than one language on the BA programmes cannot normally be taken for granted. Of those who had access to more than one language, 3 out of 5 (60%) had access to 3 additional languages.

Profile of Respondents by Discipline; Age; Gender; Access to Additional Languages

Table 1: Respondents by Discipline

Discipline	No. of Respondents
English Lit.	2
English Lit. with CW	6
Film Studies with CW	2
Media Studies	2
Translation Studies	2
	14

Table 2: Respondents by Age

Age Range	No. of Respondents
18-21	8
22-25	4
26-29	1
30-33	0

34-36	1
	14

Table 3: Respondents by Gender

Gender	No. of Respondents
M	5
F	9
	14

Table 4: Access of Respondents to Languages other than English

No. of Respondents	Additional Languages*
5/14	Norwegian (1); Punjabi (1); Greek (2); Spanish (3); Italian (1); French (2); German (1)

*Please note that the list includes all additional languages mentioned by the 5 respondents. Some respondents had access to more than one additional language.

Section 1 of the questionnaire attempted to take soundings of the strength of student beliefs and opinions in relation to a number of statements – please see Appendix 1 -- to which they reacted using a 5-point Likert scale. It set out to explore the reading-writing dynamic and the possible benefits for (creative) writers. It also aimed to have students reflect on how they read and with what purpose, if any, in mind. Finally a couple of questions treated understandings of creativity and originality in a broad sense and the extent to which they relate to a tradition and/or cultural context.

In terms of responses to the first part of the questionnaire (see Appendix 1) looking at the extent of student agreement or disagreement with a set of 10 statements, the results (see Table 5 overleaf) show a strong level of agreement among these particular respondents with respect to the value of reading in helping to improve overall ability to write creatively. While the average figure across responses was 4.5 on a 5 point scale, 10 out of 14 respondents indicated strong agreement with the statement: *In order to improve my ability to write creatively, it is important to read widely*. Relative to the craft aspects of creative writing, there was also a large measure of agreement (4.64) re the value and benefits of reading. Responses to some of the open questions served to reveal that student understanding of craft relates to such aspects of creative writing as narrative technique; character depiction; use of language and ‘style’. In addition reading was seen as a source of ideas for writers with 12 out of 14 respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement: *In reading, I get ideas for writing*. Where there was slightly less agreement overall (3.86) was in respect of the relationship between familiarity with the literary tradition and the ability to innovate and experiment. While 10 out of 14 either agreed or strongly agreed that this was the case, 1 disagreed and 3 were neutral in their response.

Table 5: Summary of responses to Section 1 of Questionnaire

Questionnaire no.	Respondent 1	R 2	R 3	R 4	R 5	R 6	R 7	R 8	R 9	R 10	R 11	R 12	R 13	R 14	Average
Q. 1	5	5	3	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	4	2	5	4.5
Q. 2	5	3	4	5	5	4	3	5	4	5	4	4	4	5	4.29
Q. 3	4	4	4	5	4	4	4	5	4	5	5	4	4	5	4.64
Q. 4	5	3	4	4	4	5	2	4	4	4	3	4	3	5	3.86
Q. 5	5	3	5	5	5	4	3	4	5	4	4	5	3	5	4.29
Q. 6	5	4	4	4	3	4	5	5	5	4	2	4	3	5	4.07
Q. 7	3	4	2	4	2	3	4	4	3	3	2	5	4	5	3.43
Q. 8	5	3	3	3	5	2	4	4	4	3	2	2	2	5	3.36
Q. 9	1	1	3	1	1	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	3	2	1.93
Q. 10	2	3	2	2	2	2	4	4	2	3	3	1	2	4	2.57

The reading process was generally seen (4.29) as requiring active engagement and involving the construction of an interpretation based on knowledge and experience. However, there was a lesser degree of consensus with respect to the challenges of reading works from another culture (3.43) and with respect to consciousness of the language of a work in translation (3.36), although 7 out of 14 or 50% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that it was more demanding to read works from another culture. Given that the majority of respondents were monolingual, it may be that their experience of reading works in translation is limited or that they approach such works without particular preconceptions. Of those who have access to more than one language, 2 out of 5 strongly agreed with the statement: *When I read a work in translation, I am conscious that it was originally written in another language*, though 3 disagreed. A follow-up question might help elucidate what seem to be rather contradictory results.

Section 2 of the questionnaire aimed to give students an opportunity to consider their responses to some open-ended questions which allowed them to have greater control over the content and extent of their responses. All three questions were designed to further explore the value and benefits in context of reading in relation to writing. The results, which can be found in full in Appendix 2, are summarized below.

When working on a piece of creative writing, do you tend to read more or less than you would for an academic assignment?

All respondents indicated that they tended to do less reading for a creative writing assignment than for an academic assignment. This was because of the nature of academic assignments which required quite a bit of reading to increase knowledge, understand critical debates and construct an argument. It was felt that in comparison with preparing to write an academic piece, creative writing tended to allow writers to draw more on personal experience (2), trust their instincts or go with the flow (2) rather than set about doing specific research. However, there was acknowledgement

from some (6) of the role of previous reading in generating ideas and getting inspiration or to check facts and details (1). A couple of respondents also acknowledged that research might have a role to play in creative writing depending on the subject dealt with and/or the format employed.

How and to what extent does your reading inform your creative writing?

All respondents felt that reading affected or could affect their work. The effects could be felt in relation to narrative technique (3); themes (4); writing style (7); depiction of character (3); action (2); language (2). For 6 respondents, reading provided a source of ideas or inspiration. The question of whether influence was conscious or unconscious was touched upon by a few respondents (3) but most tended to think that reading impacted positively and visibly upon their work.

In your view, do creative writers read differently to other readers and writers? If so, try to explain in what ways this might be so and how it might be evidenced in their writing?

A majority of respondents (9) felt that creative writers do read differently to other readers and writers. They put this down to the creative writer's ability to see opportunities for development of his/her own creative writing (e.g. technique; use of language) in a piece s/he is reading. Two respondents felt that differences in ways of reading could not necessarily be attributed to different categories of reader but simply to individual difference. A few respondents (3) did not have strong convictions either way but felt that maybe the purpose for which one is reading might determine how one reads (e.g. for pleasure or entertainment; for a specific purpose).

Concluding Remarks

In discussing the future of writing ability, Grundlach (2003: 251) indicates that cultivating a particular way of reading --

reading from the perspective of a writer, asking what can be learned from what one reads – is no less important for a high school junior, a second year law student, or an engineer than for a novelist or a poet.

In so doing, he suggests that reading as a writer is an important tool in the armory of all who would produce text regardless of discipline and irrespective of age. He sees it as a way of approaching text that invites the reader to take an active part in the learning process and to treat what they read “as a source of information about how writing works and what writing can do” (Grundlach, 2003: 251). Yet as Gambell (2001: 185) points out in discussing academic writing, despite teachers' intuitions about the connectedness of reading and writing in a discipline, students do not always see “any discourse relations between assigned readings and assigned writing tasks”. Furthermore, he contends that neither are they always explicitly inducted by their lecturers into particular discourse communities. Nevertheless, they

appear to “subconsciously glean aspects of discourse features from reading” (186) which they then attempt to apply in their own writing.

While both Grundlach (2003) and Gambell (2001) acknowledge the potential benefits of reading for writing, they differ in the extent to which they believe such a connection can be modelled and taught. For Grundlach (2003), instruction does not guarantee learning. For Gambell (2001: 188), explicit articulation by instructors of their own reading and writing processes can provide students with the metacognitive knowledge they need to recognize “the essentially creative, personal yet social nature of writing”.

What I think the results of this exploratory study point towards is a recognition by the majority of students of the connectedness of reading and writing, yet an acknowledgement among many that creative writing requires a different kind of engagement in the reading process than, for example, academic writing and that the texts produced as a result of this engagement may well differ substantially or have few obvious links with the source text. Rather, in reading, writers may get ideas for writing or learn techniques or other aspects of craft which they can then transfer to the new or target text. It is perhaps the generative and expressive rather than the informational and transactional potential of text which can be highlighted.

While few respondents explicitly addressed the issue of *what* they read, inferences can be drawn about *how* they read. Mining a text for ideas and techniques probably comes closest to the views expressed by the majority of respondents in this sample. They appeared conscious of the differing demands of critical and creative work, the latter allowing a greater role for personal experience and greater latitude with respect to what is deemed an acceptable response to a brief.

The issue of literary style was raised by a significant number of respondents (7) in terms of what can be gained through reading. However, it was not entirely clear what precisely they meant by style and whether ultimately it referred to a distinct way of writing that might be attributed to a particular author or whether it had more to do with appropriacy and/or distinctiveness in context in relation to the articulation or structuring of the themes or ideas explored. The contexts in which the term style was used suggested that in some cases respondents were using it in relation to notions of technique, while for others it appeared to relate to notions of voice or a particular use of language. Lack of definition ensured that while frequently employed, the term ‘style’ was far from transparent. Given its perceived importance in terms of what can be learnt through reading, this is perhaps an area worthy of further exploration, the more so since it might help to connect the value of imitation and mastery of particular techniques in the pursuit of the creation of something new.

What the data has not been able to demonstrate is that students of English and students of Creative Writing read differently and have different dispositions. This is partly because only 2 of the 14 respondents were students of English Literature,

having chosen the CW module as an option. In terms of those who elected to take the CW Pathway from year one, there were, as already mentioned, 6 students of English Literature with CW and 2 students of Film Studies with CW among the group of respondents. Apart from the low numbers, it would be dangerous to conflate Film Studies and English Literature without taking account of the disciplinary differences. The data has, however, been able to show awareness on the part of these students, the majority of whom were on named programmes incorporating a Creative Writing Pathway, of the ways in which they might approach text as creative practitioners. That is not to suggest, on the evidence presented here, that respondents are not conscious of being able to read for different, and potentially complementary, purposes. Indeed, comments would suggest that some of the respondents had sophisticated understandings of the role 'research' might play in creative practice, while acknowledging differences in academic and creative writing. For example, respondent 4, a student of Film Studies with CW, wrote:

Obviously, in a piece of academic work, the majority of my points would have to be backed up with relevant references, and I'd need strong understanding of what it was I was trying to get across. However, in a piece of creative writing, the subject may be something that requires background knowledge, and with this in mind, there is definitely an imperative to conduct research beforehand. Another example would be to read pieces of fiction tackling a similar theme or subject.

The same student went on to suggest that:

all 'artists' – take a film-maker, for example when he/she watches a film, they will very much act as a critic. They will actively piece together what they like and what they don't like, and it will manifest itself in their own movies. And the same with writers; when they read, they can enjoy the text like anyone else, but on another level, they would have already thought how perhaps they can manipulate it, use it as a starting point for their own imaginative piece.

Such awareness of the extent to which it is possible to draw on other texts in the process of making a new artefact and of the ability of artists to embody knowledge in their work may or may not be characteristic of those who are disposed to creative practice but it clearly does not preclude awareness of what is required in other contexts nor does it mean leaving behind or suspending one's critical judgement. Whether of course such conscious critical awareness makes for good or even better creative practice is beyond the scope of this paper, although clearly the module was designed around such a premise. What is clear from the data presented is the high level of consensus among respondents of the value of the reading-writing dynamic and the potential benefits for creative practice at a number of levels (generation of ideas, themes, narrative technique/s, depiction of character, use of language and literary style) of active engagement with past work/ings. The transformation of texts by agents who mine and manipulate them for their own purposes has been demonstrated in relation to student perceptions of the process of reading in relation to creative writing.

Future research might want to pick up on Langer's notion of differences between literary and discursive orientations (1997), terms she uses to point to different ways of approaching text based on primary purpose, that is to say, whether the reader wishes to "engage in a literary experience (literary orientation) or to gain information and understand ideas (discursive orientation)" (Langer, 1997). She characterizes the literary orientation as "exploring horizons of possibility", while the discursive orientation is seen in relation to "maintaining a point of reference, while "refining and questioning the issue to hand" (Langer, 1997). In terms of creative writing, it may be that the ability to live with uncertainty and incompleteness noted by Harper (2010) and a positive disposition towards "exploring horizons of possibility" (Langer, 1997) is characteristic of the ways of being and of reading of creative writers. Such an investigation would require more sustained and detailed exploration of the reading-writing dynamic among a group of students from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds than is feasible here. It might also be useful to rethink creative writing at a time when writing and the dominance of language can no longer be taken for granted but where the introduction and interaction of other modes (e.g. the visual) are serving to stretch the boundaries of what we understand by Creative Writing as well as challenging established notions of genre.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Copy of Questionnaire

OPEN UNIVERSITY

Exploring the Relationship between Reading and Creative Writing

Student Questionnaire

F.J.Doloughan

5/9/2011

This questionnaire has been designed to focus on student perceptions and experience of the relationship between reading and (creative) writing.

Personal details

Name (Optional):

Degree Programme:

Age:

Gender:

Languages other than English:

Section 1

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements, where 1 represents strong disagreement and 5 represents strong agreement. Write the number which best reflects your views in the column on the right-hand side. If you return your questionnaire electronically, please remember to save your version before submitting.

1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree

1. In order to improve my ability to write creatively, it is important to read widely.
2. In reading, I get ideas for writing.
3. Studying the work of other writers allows me to learn about aspects of the craft of writing.
4. In order to innovate and experiment, it is important to be familiar with the literary tradition.
5. Reading is an active process which requires me to engage with the words on the page and construct an interpretation on the basis of both knowledge and experience.
6. By reading, I extend my knowledge of the world.
7. Reading works from another culture is more demanding than reading works from my own culture.
8. When I read a work in translation, I am conscious that it was originally written in another language.
9. When I write, I try to forget everything I have read.
10. Being original means having ideas that no one else has had and expressing them in words that no one else has used.

Appendix 2

Questionnaire Section 2

Response to Open Questions

Respondent 1: MA Translation Studies

Q. 1 Academic assignments need a lot of background reading, before starting to write, it's the result of having to find someone else's ideas and work on them. Creative Writing on the other hand, is more personal and thus requires less background reading.

Q. 2 I believe that my reading affects my writing in terms of narrative techniques, but I also think that on a more unconscious level it affects the themes that I am drawn to and also perhaps the writing style.

Q.3 I believe that yes they do read differently, perhaps they pay more attention to how the storyworld is constructed and in turn, in their writing they try to produce similar effects.

Respondent 2: BA Media Studies

Q. 1 I tend to work less, because I enjoy it and find it easier to complete. Whereas the academic work, more research and planning is involved, and word counts. Although, there are exceptions, such as if I am struggling to come up with an idea it can take longer if the inspiration is not there.

Q. 2 I tend to adopt some of the styles of my favourite authors and often reading of any genre, from novels to travel brochures inspires my own work.

Q. 3 I'm not sure that they do, as I would not cast one label over all people that write creatively.

Respondent 3: BA Film Studies with CW

Q. 1 I tend to read less as I feel that a piece of creative writing is produced from my own experiences and not that of others.

Q. 2 I often adopt a similar style to my favourite authors when I write a piece of creative writing, and tend to adopt similar themes.

Q. 3 I don't think there is a difference between creative writers and other readers and writers, but simply there is a difference between everyone. Although pieces may be similar to one another, no two are ever going to be the same, for example when translating a text from one language to another, the translator will change parts of the text that s/he feels the need to change.

Respondent 4: BA Film Studies with CW

Q. 1 I would say I read less. Obviously, in a piece of academic work, the majority of my points would have to be backed up with relevant references, and I'd need strong understanding of what it was I was trying to get across. However, in a piece of creative writing, the subject may be something that requires background knowledge, and with this in mind, there is definitely an imperative to

conduct research beforehand. Another example would be to read pieces of fiction tackling a similar theme or subject.

Q. 2 For me, it usually comes in the form of influence. If I am reading a book, and admire the way the writer has used a certain character, or depicted a certain theme, or even an event that takes place, it influences me in to using a similar way of thinking. It can also be a pattern that I notice in particular novels which I have an affinity for. For example, I myself like to write in first-person, as I have come to realise that many of my favourite novels are written in this narrative mode, and due to this, I have changed the way I write quite dramatically over the years.

Q. 3 Yes, I think so. It's something that can be applied to all 'artists' – take a film-maker, for example when he/she watches a film, they will very much act as a critic. They will actively piece together what they like and what they don't like, and it will manifest itself in their own movies. And the same with writers; when they read, they can enjoy the text like anyone else, but on another level, they would have already thought how perhaps they can manipulate it, use it as a starting point for their own imaginative piece.

Respondent 5: BA English Literature

Q. 1 I tend to read less than I would for an academic assignment, since I'm consciously trying not to read any criticism or analysis of texts. I find it easier to stick just to literary works just to take some ideas out of them while using my own ideas in conjunction with them.

Q. 2 I like to follow some form of writing that I am familiar with and like. So , I believe that my reading has to do with my writing in terms of form and theme, even in terms of aesthetic and literary genres.

Q.3 Creative writers tend to write more details, using more metaphors, and narrative techniques, and sometimes it becomes obvious that they are trying to be original thus, disjoining the reader from the text.

Respondent 6: BA English Literature with CW

Q. 1 Probably less. When I put pen to paper initially I tend to let the ideas flow and write whatever comes into my head.

Q. 2 Reading provides me with knowledge of the world, different cultures, new ideas etc.

Q. 3 Probably yes if they are specifically researching information for their own writing as they will be looking for specific things etc.

Respondent 7: BA English Literature with CW

Q. 1 I tend to read less and go with my own instincts.

Q. 2 It gives me ideas for structure.

Q.3 Possibly – although I tend to be a passive reader unless it's one that I am studying.

Respondent 8: BA English Literature

Q. 1 Read less than an academic assignment. Mainly because for an academic assignment relies heavily on wider knowledge whereas for creative writing I do not read as much so I don't confuse myself.

Q. 2 My reading does inform my creative writing. When I am focussing on a particular (sic) I read as much around it in order to better inform my own work.

Q. 3 Maybe. I feel there is a difference between when reading for pleasure or purpose. Tend to look out for different things.

Respondent 9: BA English Literature with CW

Q. 1 I read less but may recall things that I have read whilst constructing my piece. It depends on the format and genre of writing however as if I have not written in that style before I may read something that will influence and help me.

Q. 2 Provides inspiration; broadens vocabulary; can learn how to write characters that can engage with audience drawing on characters I have related to.

Q. 3 Personally when reading, I will notice if something isn't worded correctly or if there are slight editing issues. This may be because when you write your own creative writing you are constantly reading and making changes to your own work. Similarly I think creative writers have more appreciation for the written word and take note of phrases they like and things that could influence their own writing.

Respondent 10: BA English Literature with CW

Q. 1 I read less because I generally already have ideas in my head from previous reading, whereas for an academic assignment reading other critics' ideas helps me to formulate an argument of my own.

Q. 2 I tend to have a preferred style of writing to read which I think affects my own writing. Storylines from books inspire me but generally I get ideas from newspapers, magazines or real life experiences.

Q. 3 Creative Writers are more likely to look for inspiration in what they read and take more note of different styles so that they can use these in their own work. However, I get inspiration from simply reading a wide range of books and articles which I generally subconsciously absorb.

Respondent 11: BA English Literature with CW

Q. 1 I tend to read less because I don't want to go offtrack with new, different ideas and just draw on texts I've read before.

Q. 2 Reading can spark ideas but mostly it gives me ideas on the style and structure of language.

Q. 3 I think they do read differently as they read conscious of literary style and techniques that may be useful in their own writing.

Respondent 12: BA English Literature with CW

Q. 1 Probably less – academic assignments require a more specialised level of reading, whereas creative writing can draw from a much wider range of previous reading.

Q. 2 Reading informs my creative writing fairly significantly, in both inspiring ideas for narratives and in helping inform the writing style, character development and vocabulary used.

Q. 3 Creative writers probably pay more attention to the mechanics of what they're reading – i.e. language used, plot devices employed, etc. than someone just reading for entertainment.

Respondent 13: MA in Audiovisual Translation

Q. 1 Less, but only because I read to have correct details/facts in a story and an essay usually requires a lot of research.

Q. 2 It may fuel my mind on a subconscious level, because I do not want to directly emulate someone else's writing.

Q. 3 It is possible that creative writers reflect more on what they read, but personally I read out of enjoyment and not analysis.

Respondent 14: BA Media Studies

Q. 1 Less, because the novels I have read throughout my life act as inspiration, whereas for an academic assignment the topic is usually something I need to research before I can begin writing.

Q. 2 I believe that everything I have ever read has potentially influenced me in some way, even if I was not aware at the time. Therefore, the style in which I write is probably an amalgamation of numerous things I have read and I often try to remember certain aspects of my favourite novels when writing my own pieces so that I can implement similar techniques in my own words.

Q. 3 I think creative writers do read slightly differently to other readers and writers as they are potentially comparing their own work to the text and perhaps looking for inspiration for their next piece of writing. Alternatively, if a creative writer does not enjoy a novel, they may use this as an example of what not to do in their own work.