



## What Creative Writing can tell us about teaching in higher education

*Transcript of recorded interview: Michelle Hamadache talking with Agnes Bosanquet (December 2023)*

**Agnes Bosanquet:** Welcome. Michelle. Thank you for agreeing to talk with me today.

**Michelle Hamadache:** Look, if I'm honest, I just do things and I find that there's a lot of time spent talking about stuff when I prefer to just get on and do it rather than talk about how I do it. That's something that's really deeply ingrained within my practice is the doing is very important.

I think the other thing that I'm really aware of is just there's lots and lots of pedagogies that work really well for laboratories, mathematics, business, philosophy, etc. They wouldn't necessarily work with creative writing. I think that the endeavour of creative writing, especially at the at the moment, is quite distinct in the sense that I'm generally not thinking vocationally. People tend to take creative writing for reasons other than finding work. And in fact, while there are lots of transferable skills, I still don't think it's the primary reason why people enroll in creative writing. And so, to transform creative writing into something that makes you employable would in essence be to, I guess, ultimately degrade creative writing. People tend to do it for existential reasons, for creative reasons, as a way of making sense of their place in the world, as a way of developing a language for talking about experiences, as an antidote for what's going on in the world, but also as an invitation to think about what it means to be human as something that is not reducible to transferable skills.

I feel that for people, for students to explore those kinds of questions – which is essentially the relationship between language and self, language and experience, language in the world, and then there is a communicability element to that because you know ultimately you want to share that story – I actually think that I have an obligation to students to present creative writing as something that actually sort of nurtures that, that hasn't been sort of swallowed up by the machinery.

**Agnes Bosanquet:** I mean, it's a really interesting positioning because there is such a dominant discourse of employability and university study for employment outcomes. So, what's your role as the teacher then? You've talked about your personal affiliation with doing. Is that something that becomes a part of teaching creative writing?

**Michelle Hamadache:** Yeah, absolutely, because I think you learn so much by doing, by throwing yourself into a task. I think one of the things is that ultimately in a classroom there could be thirty different ways of learning and one of the ways that I think that you can address that is by invitation. So, we have a lot of writing exercises that are based on engagement rather than quality and quantity. I try and disambiguate what they do in their writing exercises from what they do in their assessments.

We're pragmatic beings. If there are grades attached and there are rubrics with criteria which ask for expression, attention to detail, editing, all of those sorts of things, that sort of thinking, that kind of critical thinking, that kind of editing is required for your assessment. Of course

you're trying to do your best to submit your best work. You know all of that attention to detail is very important. I do think that's a big part of what creative writing teaches. Students is actually to really pay attention to the way words work, the way sentences work, the effect that they're [trying for], because you're actually learning to manage tone and register. That's a really profound part of creative writing. I mean, how do you introduce an element of irony into your writing through tone? I mean, that's very fine-tuned attention to the way that language works and it's an awareness of audience. It's an awareness of context. It's an awareness of the context – because it's the context on the page, but it's also the context of the readership, it's the context of the story, the story world that you've invoked. There's lots of things that are really fine-grained.

It's also really important to have this opportunity to play where the risks are low and where, actually, you're invited to write badly, to write freely, to write as much as you possibly can, to try things that you may not do well. But at no cost to yourself, because as long as you try the exercise, you know you're actually ticking the box in terms of engagement. That's where it's really important that one part of that assessment, not the whole of it, but one part and a significant part of assessment in creative writing, is dedicated to that engagement.

It's also because when I think about it, I teach any student for a very short period of time. Twelve weeks of their lives. That's it. If I think about what I want students to take away from studying creative writing, it's essentially a habit of writing. You form a habit of writing. You introduce it into your life. You realise it doesn't have to be sort of taking yourself off to a cabin in a remote wilderness.

**Agnes Bosanquet:** That would be nice though.

**Michelle Hamadache:** Very tempting, very tempting, Agnes. But you know, you hopefully introduce them to the idea that the amount of writing they can do can actually fit into most lives, because nobody gets anything done if they're not actually sort of turning up to the page. Also, I think it's the habit of making time in lives that are incredibly busy. Most students, like most of us, have a lot of work, a lot of commitments. And we're human so we need downtime as well as productive time.

I think that's actually a really important part of creativity is that you do, in a sense have to nurture and cultivate a sense of self that exceeds all of the constraints that are placed upon us. Because otherwise you just end up replicating the main discourses, or you sound, you end up writing like an automaton. There are elements where I think that you almost need free time and free writing time.

So, this idea of having a writing habit through weekly writing exercises that are various. Out of four or five writing exercises, a couple you might hate. And I'll always tell them, you know, it's totally fine to hate a writing exercise. To look at your writing in that way and just think 'nup!' You can also surprise yourself because you try things that you wouldn't try if there weren't some kind of constraint or incentive. And so, you know, I think that the writing practice and the doing and not being afraid to stuff up. I think that's a really important part.

I think we end up in this mindset where everything that we're putting on the page needs to be representative of ourselves. Is that meaningful or significant? We forget that there's a large part of ourselves that is really, deeply enmeshed in play. Pretending, pretending to be someone, pretending to do something, or just taking risks. And they are small risks. What happens? You write a few bad sentences, and you have a little bit of a chuckle and you think wow.

**Agnes Bosanquet:** There's something interesting there in what you say about that interconnection of self and writing and that sense of risk and maybe that sense of vulnerability students have in sharing their writing. How's that something you manage?

**Michelle Hamadache:** Well, look, if I'm going to be really frank, I think that it is something that – first of all with those writing exercises, there's actually a choice. So students can either choose to share their writing in a public forum in which case they might get feedback. They might get comments. We use the blog. Or they may choose to use a private forum where only their tutor will see it.

Once again, I just think that we're all very different. For some of us it's not such a big step, or it's a step that's important to take so we're happy to share early drafts and gain from potentially forming [communities]. The other thing is I do encourage them to form Discord groups and workshop groups, both informally and across the cohort and also within class, because I do think that having a community is really important to writing. That's one of the other things that I try and really encourage is this formation of a community where you are sharing goals and where you are essentially prepared to share early drafts. And the vulnerability that goes along with that because that's quite a big reward.

Then there are other people who really need the privacy in order to do that sort of play. And actually there's no difference in the way that you're marked, whether you make one choice or the other choice. I think that's something that is really important. If you're going to acknowledge that classrooms are diverse places, I think having options are really important. That's one way. I think that in situations where we have in-class workshoping, I think being really part of it. I find that modelling, I guess the skills, the interpersonal skills not just the editorial skills, because obviously it takes time to learn how language works, to learn a vocabulary that communicates strengths. There's a technical vocabulary from focalisation to characterisation to time management to all of those sorts of things. It takes time to develop that language. But I think one of the things that's really sort of important is that if the students feel that I'm there with my sleeves rolled up.

Asking the questions I think is really an important part. I think that's a really important part of the process because it's a gesture, you know, it's a very practical gesture. If people can see that I'm interested in what they're doing – and I know that sometimes it's something that's been written the night before or the morning before or the last minute. It's like tick this box. Get it done. But at the same time, at the moment that somebody takes the genuine interest in what you've done, then that's also transformative. You sit up and you have to take ownership for what you've submitted and maybe the next time you get a little bit more time in before you hit submit.

Also hearing that the criticism can come in lots of different guises. It could be humorous. It can be funny. So did you mean that? Like what? What was that going on? And seeing that there's nothing there that is sort of aimed at the self, it's aimed at the writing. I think a really important part of it, that the writing is the medium between I guess the tutor and the student, but also the student and their peers. You sort of have this thing between you that helps you to create connections and sort of creates ways of communicating and connecting. So people who would ordinarily have nothing to say to each other, nothing in common, suddenly have something in common because they're actually sharing this body of writing. I think that once students experience that, it's not really, it's not as challenging or as confronting as they imagine it's going to be, then they very quickly become eager to workshop their writing again, to hear how their writing can change, how they can improve. And it really does become something that's very much part of a writing practice, sort of getting away from this

idea that things are perfect the first time around, or that things are ever perfect, or that there aren't different opinions on what works and what doesn't work. All of those things are really important to creative writing I think.

**Agnes Bosanquet:** So you've talked about the writing exercise and the playful writing. You've talked about workshopping, giving and receiving feedback and editing in response. What else do you do in creative writing? Reading, lectures – what else?

**Michelle Hamadache:** I think that something that's really important – it's the first thing that is said in first year creative writing, is that essentially writing is reading. If you're not a reader, you're not a writer. And also I point out the fact that it's quite egotistical to be a writer and not a reader. So you want other people reading your work, but you're not going to read anyone else's? I love the first lectures and the first tutorials because you can say all of these things and nobody's taking it personally because they know that you're not thinking of one of them as you say this. Hopefully it is just a little shift in perspective so that you avoid people putting their hand up and saying 'no, I never read.' Like I want to sort of circumvent that.

**Agnes Bosanquet:** Like trying to be a chef who doesn't actually eat food or something.

**Michelle Hamadache:** Yeah, it doesn't cut it. Of course, reading as a writer is very different to reading as a literary critic or scholar. Of course, there's structural criticism and there's close reading in literature and that's very closely related to how reading as a writer happens. The analogy I use is it's like lifting the bonnet on a car and looking at the engine. You're really trying to see the bits, to see words as parts of things, to think about why they work within a sentence or don't work within a sentence. You know, to look at what other writers do in order to produce tone, register, tension, stakes, page turning, characters, you know, all of those things. To actually look at the nuts and bolts, not sort of at the level of theme and political and contextual reading, but to really look at those nuts and bolts of words on the page. What I find is that that often it's the first time that they've really thought about words and sentences as this kind of mechanical engine that has an impact.

The other thing that I always try and point out to them is that words are incredibly abstract. Your goal is to introduce as much of the concrete into your writing as possible so that you can actually press those buttons in the brain of the reader. It's like a virtual reality and the words are actually stimulating the reader's brain. Of course, you want to stimulate the senses, you want to stimulate images and feelings. And all of those sorts of things. That comes down to the nuts and bolts of sentences and words.

I think that looking closely at passages of writing. Once again, I think that it's the ability to look really closely at the page and at a passage of writing, sort of taking it down to that granular level – it takes practice. I can't tell you how to do it. You have to do it and do it again and do it again and of course you get feedback. You can come back and say, well, did you notice this? Did you notice that? Well, what about this? And, yes, there is that kind of feedback loop so it's not as though there's no role for an instructor, but ultimately there's an element of doing [it]. Jumping in. And you know, giving it a red hot go, maybe not doing a great job, but getting some feedback on how you can get closer in. Did you really think that sort of a Latinate word was right in this context? Like, here we've got a group of kids in a playground – was this Latinate word the one that you wanted, you know? So, of course, you do need to have the opportunity to provide that kind of feedback, ultimately, setting I guess exercises and questions and assessments that actually ask them to look at these kinds of things at that close level is really important.

I often have writing exercises that ask them to take a paragraph of their own writing and kind of, sort of perform a vivisection on it. Cut this, do this, follow this, because the great thing about Word is you can copy and paste so easily. It's not like students [in the past]. I actually even get them to hand write paragraphs from their favorite novels as well, because I think that there is something really important about producing those links between the handwritten, the shaping of the letters. It really slows you down when you hand write something, especially this generation cause there's not a lot of writing that happens. So, I think it is just one of those things where, like anything, learning happens in increments. It also happens in flashes. You know, like you'll be reading somebody else, you'll be providing feedback on somebody else's writing and you'll think, 'wow, it's terrible.' And then what you'll think is that 'I do that all the time.' And then you go 'never again. I'm never doing that again.' You know, that's learning.

I think sort of the absolute greatest reward is to see students – and really, it's not so much about producing the next great Australian novelist. It's actually seeing somebody who is better able to express themselves in language at the end of a semester than they were at the beginning of a semester. That doesn't matter whether it's taking you from sort of 50 to 60 or 60 to 70. It's just that there have been these gains.

I think the other thing that's really important is that I find a lot of students come to creative writing with a deficiency of confidence. You know, they've been told that they're bad writers. They've been told [that] – and sometimes it's true in terms of grammar and all of those things. But, I guess taking that out of a moral – rather than turning it into some kind of – taking it out of a value system and just looking at it objectively and saying, well, OK, so if your grammar is not that great, what are we going to do about it? There is so much grammar online that you can access. This is why this matters. This is why this sentence fragment doesn't work because you're not talking to me. I can't make sense of this. Or you're detracting from the story, this story. This fine story that you have to tell me isn't arriving because of this. These sentences are continually tripping us up, but we can fix this. And I guess because it's their own stories, perhaps, there's a higher investment. I think, once again, it's exploring grammar not in an abstract way, but in a very practical way. This is my story. This grammar doesn't work. How do I fix this sentence? This is how I do it.

**Agnes Bosanquet:** I thought I might wrap up our conversation by asking you – I have in mind two questions really. I'm happy for you to go with whichever one you think returns to the things you really want to say. My first sort of question is around the value of creative writing and why it's valuable to study at university. And my second question is really what the things you do in teaching creative writing, whether there are things that you think would work across different disciplines. So those are the two questions I was really left with.

**Michelle Hamadache:** Look, I think that the value of creative writing actually sort of plays out across a number of levels. In reality, I do actually think it's a really good way for students to improve their writing skills because they just happen to be a little bit more invested because it's their own stories. My role – and I have fantastic tutors – is to actually, essentially, do some pretty close line editing in the feedback so we're not stepping back in the way that you do in an essay and saying X, Y and Z. Part and parcel of the process is to do this line editing and get this feedback right in the nitty gritty of where things are going wrong. And then in their final assessment, they actually are forced to say how they addressed the feedback originally. I actually do really believe that it improves writing and communication skill, you know, if not exponentially, at least considerably. I think that anything that improves interpersonal skills.

The other thing that I'm very passionate about is that the imagination is not solipsistic. The imagination is very much constituted by others, by the world, by knowledge, by all of these various things. And often writers are just people who observe deeply. That impetus to look outside of yourself in order to enrich your imagination is, I think, a really important thing. The other thing that I always say is that writers are just master manipulators. They really understand how humans work. What pushes certain buttons? What pushes other buttons? You need to be able to capture that in your story. I mean, why do we feel emotional when somebody, a character, does this and another one does that? It's because some writer has understood and tapped into, you know, the sort of the emotional and moral registers and our social conventions. And they've broken them. Or disturbed them or done something. So there's lots of value in in many, many ways.

I think it's also one where there's a real invitation to be part of a cohort, and to be part of a community which I just think has endless value. I also just think that something that gets left out so often when we're just so focused on transferable skills and employability is that both those things are really only one part of being human. I think one of the things that we know is that it's getting harder to find work. It's getting harder for people to find the jobs that might feel meaningful to them. So where do we turn to for meaning and purpose? And more and more I think that people will need to look towards – hopefully others and the people in their life, and all of that sort of thing – but also to pursuits that give them meaning outside of this very narrow trajectory of career and employability. I'm the first person to say that, in order to write, you need a roof over your head and you need food on the table. Make pragmatic, sensible decisions and find yourself a secure job, first and foremost. Number one, especially with my undergraduates, but I think that that it's really important that you know sort of institutions, that social structures recognise that there is much more to being human than simply earning a dollar or fitting into, you know, sort of some kind of workplace, which we all know can be kind of fraught.

**Agnes Bosanquet:** I think one of the real values of studying creative writing then is having that space to think beyond and to kind of have that sense of value for your lived experience as a human being beyond a trajectory...

**Michelle Hamadache:** ... of profit/ loss. You know, there - And also do we want to just... I mean, if we think about the role that the imagination plays in our lives seriously, then we understand that it is actually both a terrifying and a really powerful force. There's so much of what we rely upon for our day-to-day [that] relies on an imagination, you know, imaginary nations, Benedict Anderson, just for starters. And so when we think about that, do we want to just simply replicate the same or do we want to have [more]? Do we want to be able to imagine better things? And I think that's something that writers have done for the longest time is to imagine other ways of being in the world that it doesn't have to be thus.

**Agnes Bosanquet:** Well, I think that's a beautiful optimistic note to end our conversation on. Thank you, Michelle.