

REVIEW ESSAY

BREAKING BOUNDARIES: REVITALIZING CREATIVE WRITING STUDIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Dean Clark, Michael, Trent Hergenrader, and Joseph Rein. *Creative Writing Innovations: Breaking Boundaries in the Classroom*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 256 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1474297172.

Koehler, Adam. *Composition, Creative Writing Studies, and the Digital Humanities*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 168 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1472591944.

What could college and graduate students, creative writing instructors, and institutions learn if the creative writing classroom were no longer dominated by an overemphasis on preparing students for publication? Can the collegiate or graduate workshop (or “unworkshop”) be driven instead by innovatively designed learning experiences? Can creative students transcend boundaries of classroom walls, genre-related expectations, identity, and emerging technologies at the same time that they ground themselves in literary conventions, interpretation, and theory? Given current conditions such as the long surge in popularity of creative writing programs, the saturation of the literary publishing market, and the undeniable influence of technology, these questions have been

driving innovation in creative writing pedagogy since the dawn of the twenty-first century. Two recent books from Bloomsbury Academic respond jointly that we must innovate by developing transformative educational experiences, both to better align teaching with the times and to help students discover new possibilities for the literary arts. These titles stand as essential reading for undergraduate and graduate-level creative writers who teach, particularly those who question the traditional workshop emphasis on publication and who are open to fecund combinations of rule-breaking, literary conventions, and new media. The essay anthology *Creative Writing Innovations: Breaking Boundaries in the Classroom*, edited by Michael Dean Clark, Trent Hergenrader, and Joseph Rein, takes us to the proverbial Burkean parlor to discuss creative writing classroom workshop (r)evolution via a rich array of sixteen essays, while Adam Koehler's monograph *Composition, Creative Writing Studies, and the Digital Humanities* unpacks more than three decades of scholarship to establish another nascent field, digital creative writing studies. Each volume interrogates the current situation of multiple pedagogical approaches to writing in this crossroads between disciplines. Whether read individually or as a pair, these are books whose time has come. They compellingly advance the rigor of creative writing as an academic discipline with deep ties to the sister world of composition and rhetoric while nudging teacher-writers toward innovative, process-oriented pedagogies and heuristics.

Both books herald the complementarity of composition studies and creative writing studies. To that end, *Creative Writing Innovations* contributes to the development of what Graeme Harper calls the "unworkshop," while decrying rigid demarcations of disciplinarity and genre identification in academe. Ultimately, this book furthers Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom's workshop-questioning accomplishment in their landmark 1994 volume, *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy*. Similarly, Koehler finds richness in Bishop-and-Ostrom-inspired crossover scholarship even as he predicts that current delineations between writing and technology will pass away in the next two to three decades. While the edited essay collection takes a heuristic

and thematic approach to pedagogical innovation, Koehler's book takes a purely scholarly and scaffolded approach. That said, readers will note similarities and differences among the theoretical underpinnings of each tome: *Innovations* is grounded in composition theory, literary theory, and creative writing studies, while Koehler's book is grounded in composition theory, modern philosophy, and neurolinguistic theory of creativity as well as thorough understanding of digital platforms and possibilities through which he offers broad, instantly recognizable implications for the collegiate creative writing classroom.

The college, university, or graduate school teacher of creative writing will particularly appreciate the up-to-date and detailed depictions of out-of-the-box objectives, assignments, methods, and their results in *Creative Writing Innovations*. It is a tribute to the theoretical groundedness and accessible writing in this book that even those chapters a reader might be tempted to skip or gloss over because they do not concern her primary genre do offer concepts and approaches that apply more broadly to most creative writing teachers. The essayists join the swelling chorus of those who question the continuing relevance of the old-style creative writing workshop, now over eighty years old in America, pointing out that it has been limited by rigid academic expectations of genre as well as the relatively narrow range of knowledge that student writers generally bring to the act of writing. Now the field of creative writing in the academy has triggered multiple frustrations including students' plot-driven fiction, students' inexperience with rhythm and language, academe's suspicion of the validity and rigor of creative writing studies, academics' hesitation to embrace new media, and teachers' longing to transgress traditional literary conventions as well as cultural boundaries of gender and equity. These difficulties—compounded by the long sociopolitical (r)evolution that seeks to reform or even upend many of the hierarchical and patriarchal structures on which the academy is based—have led to the shared sense among writer-teachers that the workshop must be reimagined. Hegel would be pleased: teacher-writers' dissatisfaction with the workshop has spawned

workshop innovation, and that innovation is finally coming into its own. The essays in *Innovations* demonstrate that these dialogical and dialectical innovations are being tested throughout a range of creative writing classes so that the emerging field can be taken seriously. In the context of the enervation of old systems in collegiate writing, the humanities need innovative curriculum that is tested in the classroom and driven by understanding of theoretical models from the comp-rhet crowd. Such curriculum development is poised to contribute meaningfully to a stubborn culture that grows best when its own power structures are challenged from within.

The hands-on tack of *Innovations* makes it particularly appealing for the creative writing instructor who is thirsty for new approaches to course design and individual assignments. Even grand advice such as Michael Dean Clark's call for "an active course construction that lays out the rules of creative expression in a given environment even as it deconstructs those same ideas" is theoretically grounded and illustrated with detailed course and assignment descriptions (109).

Part One addresses "Rethinking the Workshop," with chapters by Tim Mayers, Graeme Harper, and Derrick Harriell. In Chapter One Mayers lays the groundwork for the essays that follow by describing his multi-genre introductory creative writing course that is built on an "inventive, process-oriented pedagogy" (7). He provides a cogent synopsis of the history of creative writing studies and situates a few landmark texts by Bishop and Ostrom, Joseph Moxley, and others. His emphases set the tone for the book, privileging process over product in sequential assignments that offer common restrictions (a story assignment in which each student must have the same three characters, for instance) and foster an attitude of openness and reflection. Mayers makes the case for consciously designing assignments and rhetorical situations to evoke student resistance in educational experiences that become transformative. Next, Graeme Harper wields classic concepts about the individuality of the writer (which contrast with the position of later essays) in a plea for the "unworkshop" that may or may not

happen in an academic institution, concepts that seem instead to rely upon the synergy of engaged minds to foster artistic growth: the teacher's, the student's, and the collective "mind" created by students in dialogue with each other and with the world. Harper advocates for a model that eschews rigid workshop-circle rules and harkens back to the ancient mentor-student model, with a twist: the unworkshop is so flexible and enmeshed in the principle of individualized curriculum that it is "far more attuned to the networked synaptic post-digital world of the twenty-first century than the workshop can ever be" (30). In this way Harper seems to reimagine Plato for the digital age. Herein we see deep correspondences between *Innovations* and Koehler's book: a privileging of process and discovery as a bedrock pedagogical principle and an emphasis on multiple nodes or synapses of literary creation and production.

In the final essay of Part One of *Creative Writing Innovations*, poet Derrick Harriell presents his poetry collection-preparation workshop for M.F.A. students as a vital gap-filler. By dovetailing his classroom narrative with his personal story of the acceptance and requisite radical revision of his first poetry manuscript (which had "two or three" book possibilities within it), Harriell demonstrates the relevance of revising the portfolio course into sequential assignments that involve hands-on mentoring and collaboration as students craft a debut poetry collection. In this "macro workshop" students benefit from multiple perspectives on what has otherwise been a largely mysterious area of creative production in which it was assumed that students could assemble and curate their own debuts without the fertile space of collaboration that the best creative writing classrooms offer (40). Harriell is less interested, however, in challenging the academy's interest in preparing students for publication than he is in meeting the needs of his students, a segment of the creative writing student population that intends to make a career of publication. Harriell's focus acknowledges and innovates within the confines of M.F.A. programs in creative writing.

Innovations proceed apace in Part Two on genre. Rachel Haley Himmelheber picks up what, for me, is one of the most essential validations of the need for creative writing programs: in writing creatively and thinking critically about their writing, students can increase their own empathy, a crucial skill and “developmental process” for artists and citizens in an antagonistic world (45). Himmelheber presents heuristic details of a research project that involves collaboration, critical thinking, behavioral psychology, and ethics to lead students to write fiction with rich characterizations rather than plot-driven narratives. In a world of disconnection and virtual relationships, of warmongering and exclusion, Himmelheber’s students learn that observation of real people and thinking critically about why they act and speak as they do can deepen originality in fictional narratives. Looking for a moment beyond craft, Himmelheber invokes the potential of creative writing to confront and begin the process of healing interpersonal and sociopolitical rifts. Hence creative writing meets the real world, and in the encounter, awakens it. Himmelheber concludes that such experience, while far from simple, is truly transformative and therefore worth the labor of curricular redesign and retesting.

In Part Two on “Expanding Genre,” Michael Dean Clark’s essay “Sequential Experiences: Course Design as Resistance in Creative Nonfiction” applies Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi’s foundational work in creativity theory. Csikszentmihalyi’s contention that divergent thinking is essential to innovation leads Clark and others in this collection to propose scaffolded assignments and writing prompts. These assignments require association and fluidity (such as collage) as well as restrictions/obstructions that require sequencing, experimentation, or genre-bending/blurring. Clark demonstrates the interfaces among Csikszentmihalyi’s *domain* (knowledge, values, tools), *field* (community, practice, gatekeepers), and *person* (individual artist). He explains that innovators tend to break the rules of the field in order to access the domain, and that such a perspective “demands a sequence of writing situations balancing rule following and breaking in the same spaces” (108). Clark suggests that while resistance spurs creativity, adherence to domain and field to the

extent that the writer is afforded audience and publication or performance opportunities is equally important (108-09). In accordance with Hegelian dialectics, the very messiness of this creative process leads to an “expanded definition of the self” (112).

While incorporating diverse pedagogical approaches, editors Clark, Hergenrader, and Rein build their argument effectively from unit to unit, and Part Three on “Creative Collaborations” is no exception. Beyond facilitating redefinitions of the self, other essays in this collection argue that the experience of creative writing, when liberated from current conceptual and institutional strictures, can serve a dynamic function in the larger culture: one that challenges the status quo politically, institutionally, aesthetically, or in terms of genre and other traditional literary expectations. One way innovative teaching of creative writing challenges the status quo is by demonstrating the relevance of creative collaboration as a chief methodology. Several essays in *Innovations* point out the significance of this idea because it undermines, Foucault-style, the romantic notion that a tragic artist-hero is the reliable, in-control author of a clearly identifiable text, an idea that has been in decline for decades.

But this is not your father’s sense of collaboration in the workshop. In order to create this type of innovative course, the innovative professor is immediately pitted against institutional hierarchies and processes that are not designed for out-of-the-classroom teaching. Displacing the creative writing classroom literally (location-based writing) or figuratively (in non-neutral ideological spaces that question extant power structures and literary concepts) also privileges rhetorical situation (place, time, sociopolitical, or institutional situation) over authorial identity (individual artist-as-god). This is one way to use collaboration: not as a means to the kinds of stale critique that the old-model workshop often elicited, but rather as a means of co-creating elements of a creative composition: creative possibilities, multiple points of view, or some other manifestation of meaning, such as metanarrative, character-mediated language, or language-mediated voice.

This co-creation in turn requires a renegotiation of language as medium. As Mary Ann Cain states in her essay “Collaborative Story Writing and the Question of Influence”: “I want students to encounter language as if something real is at stake” by immersion in the unfamiliar (121) (one thinks, for instance, of the efficacy of immersion language programs that prepare students for extended stays in foreign nations). Writing in a park or other outdoor setting as a group leads students not only to confront the ethnocentrism often endemic to local histories, but also to experience language itself as mine, yours, or Other’s. Cain reminds us that this Bakhtinian perspective on language proves more effective when experienced than when taught by lecture: the practice of literally dislocating the classroom into nature or a city environment requires students to process these new territories as borders to be crossed, and in the process students discover that creative work begins “at the crash sites” where their expectations and assumptions collide with the understanding, ideas, and perspectives of others (122). In the course in which collaboration is both prime directive and *modus operandi*, students learn that collaboration in textual creation can take many forms: language itself is a collaborator; other texts are collaborators (intertextual assignments); students are collaborators. As a consequence of extensive collaboration in the creative space, roles mutate, further disrupting the power differential first modeled by mutations in creative language acquisition. Students are forced out of using their defaults, such as omniscient narrative point of view, and into an experience of multiple subjectivities, and in the process the role of the teacher/coach shifts from judge to “cocomposer” (125).

Two other essays in this collection pursue the place-based idea: “Place-Based Pedagogy and Creative Writing as a Fieldwork Course” by Janelle Adsit and “Our Town: Teaching Creative Writing Students to Love Research and Collaboration” by Cathy Day. Adsit points out that most contemporary fiction lacks a sense of nature, an observation that syncs with the technologically-driven lifestyles students lead. Place-based instruction, Adsit contends, facilitates description and becomes valuable in its inherent challenge to the

bromide that the creative writer should simply “write what you know.” She acknowledges persistent obstacles: accessibility is an issue; the structure of such courses counters institutional norms; Native Americans and others may resist the language of the “environmentalist” simply because the concept has always been integral to their way of life. Nevertheless, place-based writing leads to better retention and hands-on learning by opening a space for the interrogation of underlying assumptions about subject, object, cultural and institutional context, and individual identity. Cathy Day then presents her capstone humanities course that is not limited to creative writing, further setting out a list of compelling fiction texts to make the case that research and collaboration foster learning via de-familiarization. Thus are academic stakeholders assured of the rigor of the field of creative writing: as Day recommends, “Perhaps the trick is ... to show those who are nervous or skeptical about creative writing that it requires critical thinking, and to show those who are nervous or skeptical about critical writing that it requires a good deal of creative thinking” (176). This drive to apologetics in the field leads naturally to Katherine Haake’s personal and professional homage to the legendary poet-rhetorician Wendy Bishop, whose career helped establish the importance, in both the composition classroom and the creative writing workshop, of a “dialogic of inclusion” (181).

Part Four of *Creative Writing Innovations* concludes the book with riveting foci on the challenges of addressing identity in the creative writing classroom. Tonya C. Hegamin writes about embracing “Radical Imperfectionism” as a pedagogical frame and attitude in the multicultural basic writing class populated by first- and second-generation Caribbean and West African students who are in their late twenties and work full-time, about seventy percent of whom are women with children. Hegamin uses flash fiction, intention-setting, and Afrocentric science fiction and leverages taboo-writing as means to engage her students. Her approach is “an indirect hybrid” of “the bridge approach” that Teresa M. Redd and Karen Schuster Webb have called CAT (culturally appropriate teaching); she draws on African-American

students' culture and relies upon Paulo Freire's concepts of cultural literacy to motivate her basic writing students to write Standard Written English (198). Hegamin shares other heuristics such as "The Eavesdropper," an exercise that requires students to use African-American English in the service of character depiction while employing "code-switching," that is, selection of details of dialect to use or to reword so as to craft the language in character-revealing ways. This strategy teaches students at basic literacy levels some higher-level lessons about the intersection of language and identity. While the detailed peer review rubric she includes appears rather conventional, Hegamin has found it useful in teaching elements of creative writing and responsible peer reviewing to basic writers.

Strategic character-building innovations lead into issues of gender identity, which have never been more at the fore in the classroom than they are today. Ching-In Chen shares her experience of coming out as genderqueer while *en medias res* a Ph.D. program to illustrate the importance of supporting gender nonconformists in the classroom. Chen acknowledges the tricky territory of such negotiation in the college classroom, where it is not generally as easy or natural to address as in a community-based setting. Nevertheless, she calls for creative writing teachers to form the *avant garde* that leads the rest of the academy to practices of greater inclusivity. Chen expands students' understanding of identity and gender as a relevant nexus between the writer and the world. Finally, Prageeta Sharma addresses use of *The Waste Land* to illustrate "What We Do With Authorial Voices and the Postcolonial Body in the Writing Workshop" (223). Sharma cites Leslie Fiedler's campaign to "advocate for alternative discourses in reading" and Brooker and Bentley's premise that *TWL* focuses self-consciously on its own text as an act of reading (226-27). She teaches the poem as a way to illustrate the inherent relevance of literary theory to the act of creative writing. This final section of *Creative Writing Innovations* clearly shows a variety of influences by cultural notions of identity on the creative writing classroom and explores how the classroom can shape writers'

understanding of identity, texts, theory, and creative writing as a social act.

It takes courage to devote such intensive and ongoing energy to outlying pedagogical approaches in the face of ingrained institutional and psychological resistance to methodologies that challenge the structure of traditional creative writing classes in nearly every way. And the correspondences with composition theory are evident: writer-scholars are investing years in creating and refining atypical course assignments and syllabi that are designed to force the budding of young writers, many of whom are first-generation, women, LGBTQI, immigrants, refugees, or people of color whose sense of “Other”-ness is acknowledged and supported in innovative classrooms that actively engage students in critical and creative thinking.

Adam Koehler’s *Composition, Creative Writing Studies, and the Digital Humanities* considers creative writing innovation in terms of the “electromagnetic imaginary” (96) in an intricate theoretical text that explores the tension between technological culture and the conditions needed to produce art. Like *Creative Writing Innovations*, this volume critiques and updates the creative writing workshop; however, Koehler considers creative writing studies an established field and therefore seeks to establish the place of creative writing in the emerging field of the digital humanities. To this end Koehler reviews “Digital Pasts” in Chapter One, defines digital creative writing studies in Chapter Two, explores “Ideology, Subjectivity, and the Creative Writer in the Digital Age” in Chapter Three, and considers broader implications for institutional practices in Chapter Four. However, Koehler limits his craft considerations to the realm of fiction with which he is most familiar, with the exception of general mentions of the role of digital poetics in creating new spaces for literary production and experience.

Koehler sees digital writing as a way toward the linguistic and form-al innovations that creative writing teachers hope to see in student writing. After all, Koehler argues, digital writing is a valid way to avoid what Ken Macrorie called “Engfish,” or academically distorted language. In the context of new media, we see a

pedagogical path forward into an innovative, productive, symbiotic, and multimodal approach to creative writing. Such emerging artistic forms as Netprov (“the ‘live’ improvisation of storytelling across social media”) (11), Twitter lit., interactive/hypertext fiction, video games, and digital poetry are prime examples.

As Tim Mayer notes in the foreword to Koehler’s text, the traditional workshop’s tendency to focus on the surface of a piece can “bog down” the classroom and “blind us to the breathtaking and dynamic scope of all that writing is and can be” (xi). Indeed, throughout this well-informed monograph, Koehler aims to elucidate how the digital humanities can refine the relationship between composition studies and creative writing studies. Three of the scholars Koehler cites as experts in the crossover between composition-rhetoric and creative writing studies contributed chapters to *Creative Writing Innovations* as well: Tim Mayers, Katherine Haake, and Graeme Harper. Other critics and fiction writers he invokes include Wendy Bishop, Paul Kameen, Patrick Bizzaro, Paul Dawson, Kelly Ritter, Stephanie Vanderslice, Dianne Donnelly, and Douglas Hesse. Koehler identifies several landmark essay collections as paving the groundwork for crossover scholarship, including *Creative Writing Pedagogies for the Twenty-First Century* (dedicated to Wendy Bishop), edited by Alexandria Peary and Tom C. Hunley in 2015, which was modeled after *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* edited by Gary Tate, Amy Rupiper, and Kurt Schick in 2001.

Writing has always been mediated by technology, Koehler emphasizes. Furthermore, creative writing studies is following the narrative arc drawn by composition studies. Citing D.G. Myers’ *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*, Koehler points out that composition and creative writing in higher education actually “share a long and complex history” that dates back to the nineteenth century; for instance, Harvard’s “Advanced Composition” classes of the early nineteenth century were actually courses in creative writing (7). Koehler argues that creative writing studies shares common roots with composition studies in the expressivism of writer-teachers like Donald Murray and Ken Macrorie, who

argued for cross-disciplinarity and envisioned the capacity for creative and expressive assignments to cross university power dynamics. Expressivists, in their valuing of truth and the individual, invited students and teachers alike to examine voice, form, and meaning while arguing for a stronger place for creative assignments in the composition classroom. Crossovers grew in the twenty-first century, emphasizing community, collaboration, visual rhetoric, multimodal composition, and multiliteracy; here Koehler cites Gregory Ulmer, Collin Brooke, Byron Hawk, Alexander Reid, and Jeff Rice, theorists who yoke digital means of composition with sociopolitical discourse. Other key predecessors Koehler invokes frequently are Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom, David Starkey, and Joseph Moxley, the writer-editors of foundational texts in crossover scholarship. Koehler argues for a single discipline of “writing studies” (2) that he depicts as a “double helix,” with the two fields intertwined, reflexive, constantly turning in opposition to conventions (8).

Koehler, like the editors of *Creative Writing Innovations*, clearly sees implications for “Genre, process, and the production of knowledge” (112). Citing Kenneth Goldsmith’s Uncreative Writing Class at the University of Pennsylvania, which seems similar to Graeme Harper’s “unworkshop,” Koehler demonstrates that a creative writing course need “not [be] defined by the genres it aims to reproduce, but rather the ‘strategies’ it aims to employ” (112). Goldsmith’s course opens up possibilities for creative writing studies to understand “what it means to produce imaginative texts in digital environments” (113). A few of the many concrete examples of these digital possibilities that Koehler invokes are Michael Joyce’s classic hypertext short story “Afternoon, A Story” and Shelly Jackson’s cyberfeminist “Patchwork Girl,” published electronically on StorySpace in 1996. An apocalyptic and radical reworking of the tale of Frankenstein’s bride, this hypertext story shows the protagonist patching herself together after being molested, ripped apart, and reassembled time and again. This act of frustrated reconstruction of the female body, a tale written in digital environs, can be seen to represent Everywoman with her

complex history: multiple oppressions, assaults, voices, identities. The reimaginings, reconstitutions of self, writing, and Other in “Patchwork Girl” are made possible in part by the shared needle and thread of the cyber world.

To his credit, Koehler underscores the importance of critical thinking about media, audience, and reader awareness in digital environments. Koehler argues that concepts of creative production should supersede hermeneutics of literary interpretation (135), resulting in production of knowledge, creative innovation, and new ways of writing, reading, and publishing that far transcend the idea of textual consumption. Koehler shows how postmodern fascinations with participatory consciousness of readers, the displacement of authorial authority, and both aesthetic and sociopolitical transgression of conventions are leading the humanities into the paradigm shift of creative composition across media. Insightfully, Koehler expertly brings us back around, time and again, to the vitality of ethics and theory in multiple media. For instance, in making his case for teaching creative writing in the digital context, he returns to Heidegger’s negation of distinctions between artistry and talent. Themes such as the ethos of humility required in downplaying authorial control, the ethos of innovation in service of discovery, and the ethos of empathy, all of which are highlighted in *Innovations*, find full measure in Koehler’s book.

Creative Writing Innovations and Composition, Creative Writing Studies, and the Digital Humanities expand on the work of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) and the new Creative Writing Studies Organization (CWSO), both of which are helping refine creative writing studies and expand conceptions about and teaching of creative writing. Both of these books view the complementary fields of composition studies and creative writing studies as working from personal reinvention (expressivism) toward societal reinvention (identity studies, new media, and the digital humanities). Both are grounded in writing, literary, and pedagogical theories as well as contemporary creative texts that challenge students’ (and the academy’s) concepts of process, publication, genre, identity, and creative writing in general.

Yet, the concepts of readership and the value and social meaning of publication differ in these two books. While most of the essays in *Creative Writing Innovations* seek to subvert the primacy of publication readiness in the creative writing classroom, particularly those centered around the undergraduate classroom, Koehler is more interested in expanding our concept of publication and creative writing production to embrace digital creation, production, and reading, with digital reading viewed as an element of co-creation. Both volumes, however, value experimentation, fluidity, inclusivity, genre-blurring, and teacher flexibility as they reimagine the discipline of creative writing, situating the field in the trifecta of composition studies, the humanities, and digital studies. Most heartening to the creative writing instructor is the commitment of these writers to transformative education that balances innovative approaches to teaching literary elements with boundary-breaking creative processes and media.

