Episode 027: Creative Practice Transcript

Hello and welcome to episode 27 of the Learning and teaching podcast from Newcastle University.

I'm Kieran from the Learning and Teaching Development Service, and I'm your host this week.

The episode today is on the subject of creativity. Or to be precise.

Teaching creative practise in higher education and the home for this at Newcastle is the School of Arts and Cultures.

But of course, as with any particular pedagogical neighbourhood, there are activities,

discourses and strategies that will resonate with the wider academic community.

All disciplines involve the creative function at some point in the process of knowledge production.

Teaching itself demands creativity. Creative practise as a discipline can seem mysterious.

And yet we enjoy the fruits of that labour all the time with a life in a gallery on television, radio or online,

but also in the shape of the built environment, in consumer product design, in the visual and sonic saturation of our attention every day,

even down to the composition and texture of the sound of an email notification.

So how can creative practise be taught? I went to find out about two departments where they don't just sit around waiting for inspiration,

but where poetry, music and many other things are made.

First to the School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics to meet Dr. Tara Bergin, an award winning poet,

a recipient of the Seamus Heaney prize no less. English Lit students can study creative writing in Newcastle and Tara teachers in the poetry pathway.

Then I visited Dr Will Edmondes in our music department, senior lecturer in Contemporary Performance Teaching, Creative Musical Practise,

and an acclaimed musician and composer himself, regulatory in Europe and featuring contemporary music festivals with the band Yeah You.

I know somebody who was just starting creative writing course and their parents kind of touched me and said, "What is this?"

Dr Tara Bergin and creative writing. How do you actually go about studying creative writing?

And they said, "Is there, for example, a reading list?" I mean they couldn't even imagine what that reading list might look like.

So first of all, I could say yes, there is an extensive reading list,

and the leading reading lists change and grow depending on contemporary writing as well.

So a creative writing course here in Newcastle is three years long.

If you do creative writing here in Newcastle, you do it with English literature.

It's about a third of your English literature degree, so that's about one- what we call one module every semester that you do in creative writing.

And what it looks like is a list of books that you read, the list of events that you go to.

And then a series of lectures and workshops that you attend and the work that you submit is creative work.

So for example, I teach poetry. So if you decided in, say, in year two, you wants to concentrate on writing poetry,

you would come to my lectures where I talk about different types of writing.

We read different poets and even in the lecture hall, I get students to do writing exercises.

Then you go off and you work on your own poetry and you hand in about 10 poems at the end of that whole term.

And you also accompany it with a short essay describing your working processes and

how you draughted and reworked and where you've got your ideas and importantly,

the work that you've read to inform your own writing. And so each time you hand in creative work and that work gets marked,

which students are often horrified to hear when they start out, but it all works out in the end.

And and by the end, you can actually do for your third year.

You can do a dissertation, which is all creative work.

So whereas some of your peers who are doing literature might want to do a dissertation, say on Jane Austen's use of writing letters in her novels,

you might decide that you're going to do poems that you write yourself and you hand in approximately 20 poems and an an essay.

And it looks basically like a kind of book that you've written a short collection of poems,

and it's very exciting for those students who want to do it. And it's terrifying at the same time.

Of course, there will be some students who've been writing for many years who've been thinking about being a writer for

many years and perhaps even published work and then other students who have had it in the back of their mind.

Perhaps it's that secret that they've carried around with themselves and they they take that step,

but they've never really even told anyone that they're interested in writing.

And they've never tried it, really.

And then you have other students who do it for fun to see what happens when you when you take a module that is creative writing.

For the whole degree, what they would expect to do is they come in and they make music.

I'm one of those people who thinks they should be making more music from the start.

Dr. Weil Edmonds from the International Centre for Music Studies

In this department, the first year is core, everything is compulsory. They will do performance. They will do composition. And in the module that I run, which is that module in the first year, those things are together.

So you know that their composition and their performance melded into one.

That includes doing cover version, but treating abbreviations as an opportunity to be creative, you know, to to compose with the material you got.

There is a dedicated musicology module for learning to write about popular music because while most

students come out of the course thinking that they want to be musicians or performers or artists,

there's always a portion that start to become more interested in the idea of writing about it.

They get instrumental lessons paid for as part of the deal.

So whatever the chosen instrument is, doesn't have to be whatever they've been playing to date.

Students can choose to actually have that one tuition in songwriting, for instance.

I really, really try and encourage as many students as possible to think about doing their instrument,

and lessons in sampling and sequencing is what we call it.

So, you know, learning to to work with digital audio workstations or drum machines or scents or samplers,

whatever, because, you know, at least 90 percent of the commercial and the music is done like that now.

And it's just really useful skills, you know,

learning to have the power to to at least have a knowledgeable dialogue with your producer or producer on tracks, you know.

The choice broadens out on the second year and then the final year is even more free.

And like most degrees in the university, looking at 40.

Up to 60 credits have independently led study dissertation, specialist projects, that kind of thing.

We've now at the moment got more practical stuff again. Somebody's going to be 70 next year, this coming year.

Can do performance. They can do DJ studies with Mariam.

They can do. My new module on creative practise with the studio and that kind of stuff, she's actually much more industry focussed in a broad sense.

You know, we're going to actually talk about how do you promote your work?

That's some of the curriculum and degree programme design from Tara and Will. I asked Tara, how does that pan out in terms of the day to day?

What kind of thing kind of creative writing, poetry, student expect?

So in a lecture, you sit in there with lots of other students and we might talk about,

for example, how to use a notebook might look at examples of famous writers notebooks.

Sometimes they use them while they're walking around outside. Sometimes they use them while they're sitting, looking at a painting and taking notes.

Sometimes they write them very late at night, sometimes very early in the morning.

There's sometimes pictures drawn all over them, scribbles. They're indecipherable, or there's only one word written on one page.

And the point is is we. Then we talk to students and we ask them to keep a notebook. It might be called your day book night.

The Night, book whatever. Keep notebooks. Keep notes.

And so we might do an exercise where we say, OK, we're in the classroom, but I want you to think of five place names that you remember from childhood.

Place names that weren't Real Place names. You wouldn't find them on the map.

Then the words that you used to name that field or that lane,

or that broken down pub that used to hang out outside and just list them, you've got five minutes.

If you don't have any, make something up or just write that you don't have any anything like that,

any material that you have on the page you can use later. Great. And we'll do it.

We'll say that's not exercise done on their mind. Say, OK, the next five minutes, we're going to do some other sort of spontaneous writing.

Write down five words that you really love.

And next write down five words that you really hate and say, OK,

now you've got a whole load of material you might not use at all, but you've got material.

This is what a notebook be used for.

And then later on, we might ask them to try and use some of those words in a piece of writing, and we'll talk about how you can do that.

I do a lot of work with other types of art forms, so we might look at a painting.

Talk a little bit about, say, a work of art and get students to take notes and then say, right,

I want you to write about this painting using the notes you've taken, but also allowing some of yourself in there as well.

And what's really wonderful and interesting and exciting is that every student will do something different to the same stimuli,

and that is a fascinating thing about creative writing course.

And it's something that you can kind of worry about, isn't it?

When you walk into a room with, say, 50 other people, you think we're all going to be writing the same thing?

They never are. That's what we're encouraging individuals freedom within these set limits.

And it's surprising what what can happen within those limits, when that when that individual is given a certain set of instructions,

but they're also free within those instructions to find their own voice.

It's powerful when students respond to, say, a very simple stimulus that you put out there and you don't know what's going to happen.

And sometimes for those students who are brave enough to do this in front of everyone else,

I'll ask people if they have anything they're willing to read out. And often, you know, people are very embarrassed to do so.

But if there's trust in the room which we do build up and they will and it's wonderful and these are these are how we begin to write,

we try things out. And that's the thing. It's important to try things out.

It's that idea that you can play, which is so exciting as well.

Again, I sometimes say to students, think about this white page as a as a stage, and it's yours to do what you want.

OK, this is where you belong. This is home. You go in there and you can be whoever you want to be as well.

And that's the thing about poetry. Often noticed that in creative writing courses, it's advertised as fiction, poetry, theatre.

I think, well, you know, poetry can be fiction, too. And it's about recognising that, oh, there is a way to enjoy this.

And how does creative practise embed in the broader degree? Does it help or does it increase complexity?

It helps, it helps you, as you know, understand what you're reading that you're doing with the rest of your course.

It's incredibly beneficial to those students who are reading novels and poetry that they're studying and having

to write essays on to understand what a writer the steps that a writer takes to create a piece of of work,

a piece of written work and that actually informs our essays and makes them better and critics as well as writers.

And I just think it gives you an insight into the choices that a writer makes because think, for example,

one of the things I might talk about in a lecture is first lines and last lines,

and suddenly you realise that there's a power to an opening sentence and then you start to think about.

So first of all, you have to read other writers and think about what they're doing.

Then you write your own work, then you think about how you can make it better.

So you're informing yourself, you're informing your writing and then you're working on your writing and you're

reworking it. A lot of people when they start out writing myself included.

You write kind of by instinct. You write because you feel an emotion and you put it down on paper.

It's a little bit like a diary. You express your feelings and then many years later.

For me, it was many years later. It suddenly dawns on you that you can go back to that.

You know, sometimes you think will have written it. I can't touch it. It's magic. It's a special thing now.

It's sealed off. I can't go back to it.

And it's horrifying to think that someone might say, that's not a great opening line, you think, but that's the opening line.

And then when you recognise it, oh, you mean you can, you can change your own writing.

It's a it's a big deal to recognise that. And sometimes that can happen.

Say it might be a year or two of your degree that you realise it's OK to go back and change stuff.

It's actually a good thing. And you go back and you think that could be better and you start putting lines through things.

You start moving sentences around. You start looking at how it looks on the page.

You want it to be shorter or longer or more full stops. No full stops.

All sorts of things start to experiment. And this is very exciting. This is something that we encourage lot.

So that gives us an idea as to how creative work can be generated. But now to a key question and creative practise,

which is how can creative work be assessed from an institutional sort of infrastructure point of view?

The model outline form for a start. writing in as abstract a way that gives you the space to allow students to breathe in it.

It tends to be a case in very general terms. It tends to be a case that.

If students are doing something and it works, it works the same for essays as well, if students are doing something really well.

It really doesn't have much in the way of originality to it, but they're managing to do a very good job of doing something.

That always is there, that type of scenario. Then there will always get something in the 60s for that.

The crossover to the 70s is once they've managed to bring stuff in is and this is

the same for essays that is synthesising certain things to make original insight.

And that applies to creative practice insofar as, you know.

Yeah, this is like Stone Roses, but actually, you've got, you know, you've got these other elements that have come from stuff that is also recognised.

But actually, there's also something in there that really just comes from you, you guys personally,

that there is and it is working really well, the ones for whom those modules really work and the ones who came here for that sort of work,

you know, they feel comfortable fairly early on that they're not going to be misunderstood and

that whatever direction that personal intuition or taste or pathway of discovery,

whatever takes them won't be.

Band, it won't be misunderstood, it won't be thought to be too trivial or be,

you know, I think this is something that is as can be a worry for students starting it.

I mean, I know it is because I'm I come to open days and I talk it open days for students before they even begin.

And this is usually the just two questions that they ask. And when it's like, what is the course like?

What do I do? And also, how do you assess this? How are you going to give me a mark?

And the important thing is, is that we basically we have a set of criteria.

That remark against, it's broken down into sections, it's not just is it any good general opinion your you know, your general opinion on this.

The criteria are broken down into how has the student responded to the materials of the module?

How has it been informed by their reading and background research?

How have they played around with ideas? Have they been experimental and has not worked?

And you know, is there a distinctive voice that they're they're working on things like that?

So we're able to look at a piece of work and ask questions of it,

according to this set of criteria and and actually, we bring along that criteria to the classes as well.

We usually do a class based around the criteria and talk about what does this criteria actually mean?

What do we mean by writerly intelligence? And we talk about this and then the students realise this is what they're working towards and

it's actually there for a reason to help them improve and develop their skills as writers.

So they're very aware that there are certain things that we look for and that those things are very clearly laid out for them.

I mentioned lectures, but we also have workshops where the idea is you might bring along a work in progress.

And again, this is where trust in the room is always very important and you might read it

out and the other people in the room might suggest I thought it was strong.

And sad but maybe the ending was a bit weak or something like that,

and you have to learn to think about that and say, yes, that's that's good advice here.

But no, I'm not going to take it or whatever.

And this is a process that you go through as well when you're studying a university about presenting work in progress and trying to improve,

taking on feedback. And once you recognise that it's the work that's being looked at and not your own self, your own emotion,

I think that helps with that idea of being the author and signing your name because you

realise I can make a good piece of work without it being without it being completely raw.

In fact, it's probably not as good if it's raw.

We talk about this phrase creative practise. And really, that's coming together, isn't it, of that creativity that first need?

You have to express something in words on a page.

It might be that you've seen a beautiful sunset, or maybe that you've you've got a broken heart and you need to write it down.

And then there's the practise side of it comes in, which is a sort of what is practised literally mean.

It kind of. I'm rehearsing of a of a habit, you know, a development of a habit, a redoing of something.

So you have this initial thing, you write it down, but then you wait.

And if you develop the practise and you become a writer, it's the same for all writers.

They have the thing, they write it down and then they wait and they accept that they're going to go back to us at some point.

When they go back, it's cooled down. And if it's cooled down.

You can look at it as if you're looking at someone else's work and you can say, "Yeah, it something, it's not finished,

but I know what to do because I can see immediately that it's too long" or whatever, or "I can see immediately.

It's too short." And that's the process, and it's longer than maybe you first thing when you start.

Tara mentioned trust in the room there, which is so important in creative practise teaching.

And there's an added dimension within music, which is group work, so much of it is collaborative.

Will Edmondes again, if you if you can, if you can find a way as a group,

it's not always easy because we throw them together and sometimes they don't get on or whatever.

But she can find a way as a group to have a personal investment in it creatively to the point where,

as the weeks leading up to the assessment are going by, you're starting to get really excited about presenting this work.

Then you're almost certainly going to get it first if you actually play it well.

It's fun when you get the two years with them because the first year is always a bit of, you know, certain people connect pretty quickly.

Every year, there's going to be at least one group where it doesn't quite work on a personality- what's funny about that.

That particular process and those modules with which you know where we work and this,

you put them into groups and all that kind of stuff is that no matter how badly

it's going for them in that week to week. They all have studio time every week, so.

And you know what they will 'Crit' in finite is what we sort of go round and to present work and even the ones that

haven't been- for who it hasn't been going well with the necessity to still present and deliver on that particular day somehow comes together.

Not always amazing and always great, but. And this is, I mean, that's pretty useful.

Things about that is that is exactly how it is in the real world, you know?

I mean, you know, one of my favourite examples that I tried selling early on is something like the snakes where,

you know, is that whole Lancaster Gate punk thing going on with reggae parties and stuff and and.

And those three women were like, Yeah, yeah, we're going to do a gig on Saturday, and they'd never played before.

You know, it's like within seven days they were on stage and whatever that gig was like, it would have been recorded.

But it's a great story. You have to deliver.

And I love that.

But that goes back to that, trust thing then because even the first year, we don't put them in groups for about three weeks or so.

Maybe it's longer than that. We can get a lot of conversation just to get a sense of what people are and who they are before we put them into groups.

Trust in the room. Group work, creative expression. It sounds like it could be an intense environment that requires skilful learning design.

How do students respond to the potential for criticism via assessment. It's a very important process.

I think that all writers have to go through,

this is the part of the process that they're going to go through in their three years, which is starting out thinking.

First of all, that writing should be a spontaneous reaction to a feeling.

And then as the time goes on and we talk about criteria,

they realise their work is being marked and they're getting feedback on it as to how they might

change it or alter it or what they could do or what works really well and what doesn't work so well.

That's the thing, isn't it? It's the difficulty of of all of those the stages we have to go through.

And it's never easy, ever. It's always disappointing.

When something you write that you think is good, you realise later is maybe not as good as you thought.

And I suppose a writing course is about learning that.

That's not disastrous, though, to realise that it's not a judgement of the emotion that's on the page.

It's not actually even to do with their experience as as if indeed it had been experience that's really beside the point.

The point is, this is a writing course to see how the writing works on the page.

And it's a relief then, of course, and actually very freeing.

Like all disciplines, there are sometimes preconceptions and misconceptions of what 'good' in inverted commas looks like,

and a structured course can help students to focus on objectives that they haven't considered before.

One thing that they do get worried about is originality.

And this is a real problem, isn't it, that we as writers, we want to be original because that seems always to be equated with good.

And then you strive for originality, and it's like the hardest thing actually to do just because you want it.

And I always say, don't worry about the subject matter of being original.

The best thing, really, is subject matter that's completely unoriginal. Life, death, love, hate, war really well known.

Subject matter is probably what the you know the best work is about.

Where the originality starts to come in is in the voice and the handling of that subject matter.

And that's of course, what we're assessing is what have you done with this subject matter using your reading and your understanding of other writers,

using your experience of other art forms and informing your own imaginative take on whatever it is you're writing about?

I think another fear that people have when they begin a creative writing course is that they're going to be tainted or that

their their special connection with their writing will somehow be broken or destroyed by focussing on it too much or studying,

you know, to study something can be kind of to kill it. And also, they're afraid that if they read other writers while they're writing,

they'll either start to copy that writer or end up doing a pastiche, or it'll somehow influence their writing in a negative way.

But actually, what they learn and discover through their three years of doing, writing here taught by practising writers,

is that influence is a wonderful thing for a writer, and it rarely ends up being a pastiche.

Even if you're told the lesson today is try doing, try doing a pastiche of Hemingway, which was, you know, perhaps one of the most pastiche writers.

And even then, it's hard to really do a pastiche.

Even then, your own voice will will squeeze through and something will happen.

So actually looking to a very well known work of art and saying,

What is it that you think is good about that and try it out yourself, you will come up with something original in you.

So it's all about informing. And it doesn't destroy. It doesn't destroy your writing.

It makes it stronger. It makes it more disciplined.

It is this weird thing with what we're doing where I think this is different from other disciplines because it's where the

academic and the research completely overlap with the vocational in a sense,

because one of the things I'm most concerned about disavowing a lot of these kids that come in from is.

What they've been told by the media or even by school so far, which is that there's only really a narrow set of parameters you can go for,

and it's really just Adele, Coldplay and Metallica, depending on what kind of teenager you are or, you know, maybe broader.

I mean, you know. And the nastiest thing about that is that all those things have already been done, so if you actually try and compete in that field,

you're really starting like it's a bit like Derby County Game docked ten points at the beginning of the season.

It's like, you know you. You're disadvantaged from the beginning, so the broader you can get it, and I always say, you know,

all of the biggest names of the biggest stars in pop and rock history have been people like Iggy Pop, who was listening to John Cage.

And, you know, they'd be people or even Berry Gordy saying that his favourite musician to listen to in the 60s was Ornette Coleman.

You know, these things that they were all lacking as broad as they possibly can.

And so Berry Gordy ends up being one of the greatest writers or producers of, you know, danceable three-minute pop songs with an emotional content.

But he wasn't making avant garde music, but he was listening to it.

So it's it's it's my job is about removing the barriers to what they could actually get from themselves.

You know, they don't have to try and be somebody else. They can bring what they've got.

A word that is dear to both the arts and the sciences is experiment.

And of course, the thing about experiments is they don't always go perfectly. The final word on this from Tara.

One of your questions that you sent me was, are there any attributes or skills which are particularly hard to assess?

Well, my first answer is going to be no, it's all still there. It's all fine. We've done the criteria.

But actually, I was thinking there's one that's the university system makes it hard to give marks for and that is for failing.

But that's a really important part of being a writer. And so to accommodate that, we've done a couple of things.

That's where the essay that-

Remember, I mentioned a sort of commentary that you can write to accompany your poems, which can be a sort of horrendous idea on the one hand.

But actually, it allows you to explain how you felt and how that was a really good point in your writing.

And you can talk about that a little bit and you can even point to some of the poems that you're

submitting and say the second poem in my portfolio is not as strong as I wanted it to be,

but I was really trying hard to write a sonnet and I and I was playing around with that idea and that's what I was striving for.

I hope in future to get better at this. And you can suddenly then you start to be able to give marks for failing in that instance.

But the other thing is is that we have a second year module that I've developed with my colleague Jacob Polley, and it's called creative practise.

And in this, we give a lot of exercises,
a lot,

of very short exercises where we ask students to try something and it's the trying of it that we give marks for.

So we say we want to see a notebook page, we want to see these lists of words, how you've played his memory, how to play with colour and so on.

And so we've developed a whole module where the whole module is based around trying stuff so that you can see what works and what doesn't.

And so we've allowed that sense of trial and failure to become part of the process of becoming a writer because it always is.

You're coming into the English department, right?

But imagine you are walking into the fine art department and you all were just here to make your poems

or to make your stories like they are in the fine art department there in the studio trying to find stuff out.

They don't expect to go in and get it right straight away. And if you walk around the fine art department,

you expect to see people making mistakes and trying things out and going back and

looking at other art and coming back in and trying that out for themselves and so on.

Just imagine you're that person because you are you're also the creative practitioner.

And the same way, you know you are also the scientist. This is not just one thing that you need to get right first time.

This is the whole process of being the writer. And that's all for this episode.

Sincere thanks to Dr. Tara Bergin and Dr. Wil Edmondes for their insights into the world of creative practise teaching.

If you'd like further information, you can check out, the show notes. And as always, please like subscribe and tell your friends, goodbye.