

## *Chapter 12*

# The Radical Future of Teaching Creative Writing

**Nigel Krauth**

The migration of readership from the paper page to the e-page forces teachers of writing to address major changes in publishing and the kinds of outputs writing students produce. Stephanie Vanderslice notes that with web 2.0 ‘the terrain shifted’ for creative writing teachers and admits that, like many teachers, she was tempted ‘to hide from this new technology’ (Vanderslice, 2013: 138). Graeme Harper observes ‘the impact of contemporary digital technologies’ on writing and publishing, especially how – using the internet – writers now publish and distribute their own work (cutting out traditional publishers) and talk directly with their audiences. Harper suggests that the ‘role universities play in supporting and developing creative writing needs to be considered in light of this 21st century evolution’ (Harper, 2012: 22).

While forward-thinking individual academics note the changes and ask questions about them, university creative writing programs have been slow to reflect, or even recognize, this evolution. Discourse at departmental levels has largely avoided questions like: ‘With the prospect of paper publishing becoming a thing of the past, what writing processes should we teach?’; ‘What will everyone be reading in 10 or 20 years’ time, and what will publishers be looking for?’; and ‘What do our students need to know now in order to make a living in the future?’ Writing for hypermedia has been thought of as someone else’s business – belonging to the IT and Communications people, or the New Media Arts people. Creative Writing, and the English departments it is often housed in, need urgently to address this situation.

Eminent librarian and historian Robert Darnton contends that ‘whatever the future may be, it will be digital. The present is a time of transition, when printed and digital modes of communication coexist’ (Darnton, 2009: xv). Jeff Gomez, a marketing director for Penguin Group (USA), says: ‘While print is not yet dead, it is undoubtedly sickening’ (Gomez, 2008: 3). One well published American children’s author, Roxie Munro, declares: ‘I don’t

think, sadly, that the average house will have a bookshelf in 30 years [time]' (National Public Radio, 2012).

Gunther Kress states the situation clearly: 'The *book* has now been superseded by the *screen* in the role of dominant medium of communication' (Kress, 2003: 12, his italics). He writes:

One might say the following with some confidence. Language-as-speech will remain the major mode of communication; language-as-writing will increasingly be displaced by image in many domains of public communication, though writing will remain the preferred mode of the political and cultural elites. The combined effects on writing of the dominance of the mode of image and of the medium of the screen will produce deep changes in the forms and functions of writing. This in turn will have profound effects on human, cognitive/affective, cultural and bodily engagement with the world, and on the forms and shapes of knowledge. *The world told* is a different world to *the world shown*. (Kress, 2003: 1, his italics)

During and beyond the period of transition – a time of uneasy co-existence between print and hypermedia (which may, of course, last a long while yet) – Darnton predicts that 'book professionals [will continue to] provide services that will outlast all changes in technology' (Darnton, 2009: xvi). Darnton includes editors, designers and marketing consultants among his 'book professionals', but surely creative writing teachers need to be counted there too.

So what are teachers doing in reacting to the technology changes their students have to cope with? Adam Koehler, commenting on the proliferation of creative writing studies research in the last four years, observes:

While all this work admirably approaches some of the urgent pedagogical, methodological, and institutional concerns developing in creative writing, one set of concerns ... remains largely unaddressed: the ways in which creative writing, or creative writing studies, engages with, understands, responds to, and thrives in an age of digital writing. (Koehler, 2013)

And what are these researchers'/teachers' departments doing about the problem? Joseph Moxley says, in a vaguely hopeful way:

Eventually innovative English departments will develop their own interactive writing environments to support the excellent works of their

students. With students leading the way our disciplinary identity will be substantively revised. It's just going to take a little time. (Moxley, 2010: 237)

Many books have been published in the debate about technology change and the future of the book (e.g. Birkerts, 1994; McGann, 2001; Nunberg, 1996; Striphos, 2011; Thompson, 2005; Vandendorpe, 1999) but major questions for creative writing teachers remain: Where is the teaching of creative writing headed? What will the fiction and non-fiction of the future look like? How significant are the changes we need to make? What new infrastructures must be put in place? Are we dealing with these matters too late? And, are English departments as we know them really capable of handling these problems?

Children grow up reading some of their books as apps now. I have seen infants try to turn the pages of paper books by swiping them. In various US, UK and Australian primary schools, iPads are distributed to pupils from first to fifth grade as the official learning device and their use is integrated into a wide spectrum of the curriculum, including the teaching of writing, literature and technology (see e.g. Burley School, 2014; Department of Education Western Australia, 2014; Square Group, 2013). Leading publishers Pearson, Macmillan, Oxford University Press and others now produce university textbooks for iPad (Apple Inc., 2014). The study of the use of hypermedia in education has its own academic research journal: the *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia (JEMH)* (published by the Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education – see <http://www.ace.org/pubs/jemh/default.htm>). However, as Jay David Bolter noted in 2011:

Although many, perhaps most, novelists now use word processors to prepare manuscripts for publication as printed books, our literate culture still believes fiction belongs in the space defined by printing. (Bolter, 2011: 121)

Despite extensive experimentation on the radical fringes, and a handful of notable exceptions in the mainstream (see e.g. Foer, 2006), the adult novel in the first two decades of the 21st century is still a print phenomenon at odds with the new literacy products informing primary and secondary school education. Constrained by the fact that adult mainstream publishing (as opposed to publishing for children) has been slow to embrace the range of hypermedia platforms for creative works, the teaching of creative writing at university level has remained significantly focused on paper publishing outcomes.

Among the iPad apps for teenage fiction readers, there is the 2013 Bologna Children's Book Fair prize-winning version of Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse*. This app novel is published jointly by children's publisher Egmont and Touch Press. The former's blurb says:

The app features a specially filmed performance of *War Horse* by author Michael Morpurgo, accompanied by musicians John Tams and Barry Coope. It also features interviews with Michael Morpurgo filmed by award-winning arts media company Illuminations in Iddesleigh (Devon), where the novel begins and ends; historians discussing the First World War from the battlefields of the Western Front; the National Army and National World War I museums; and more. In addition to the abridged text used for the performance, the original book's full text is included alongside a full audio reading, an interactive timeline packed with narrated quotes, war videos and artefacts, allowing the reader to delve into the historical background of the story. (Egmont, 2013)

So, it's a work of fiction, of non-fiction, of history and it's exegetical. It's richly illustrated with photography, graphics and digital cleverness. It incorporates various performances, including by the author, and has a number of music soundtracks. It costs \$6.99. Even in the co-publisher's short website introduction/trailer/blurb (Touch Press, 2013b) you get a feel for the fact that this is a variety of texts and a variety of reading experiences. In a way, it's like reading in three dimensions – it does for the novel what Cinerama, then 3-D and then Sensurround sound did for film. This is the high end of hypermedia fiction publishing in the future.

Another example of hypermedia fiction – in this case a collaborative web novel by Kate Pullinger, Chris Joseph *et al.* called *Flight Paths* – is not so expensive or elaborate (Pullinger & Joseph, 2012). This DIY hypertext novel has cut out the publisher and isn't too fancy, but it does show the potential of the digital novel form. I find as I read this work, with its strong integration of text, images and soundtrack, that I begin to interpret the visuals as text – to accept that the images are replacing paragraphs of setting and description, so I process them in that way. Similarly, I know the music soundtrack is about atmosphere and emotion, and I interpret it as replacing a textual commentary on the characters' situations and feelings. I change, expand and reinterpret these different modes, or channels, of meaning into a hybrid narrative 'reading'. I'm not watching film or listening to music, I'm reading the combination of text, image and sound as text.

The use of several modes at once – several sites or channels of meaning simultaneously – enriches the reading experience; but also we need to know

*how* to read in this way. Our current monomodal literacy (that employed in the reading of traditional text novels, for example) does not cope well with multimodal inputs: we get confused, we feel overloaded, we think we can't focus on so many strands at once. We say the novel cannot be multimodal: that it's just too hard to read – 'exhausting', one critic calls it (Bellafante, 2009). (Of course, the actual structure of the paper book – held in linear order by the spine – is part of the problem here, and I'll come back to it later.) But we read films successfully, and they involve at least two sites or channels of meaning – the visual and the auditory. And television advertisements, like computer screens, encourage us to read images and text together, and they even add a soundtrack to help (not hinder) us doing it.

To learn about multimodal reading we can turn to Gunther Kress and others such as Gregory L. Ulmer (2002) and Jan Rune Holmevik (2012) (the latter both call their version of hypermedia literacy *electracy*). In Kress's analysis of multimodality, the way we read has changed due to our exposure to screen-driven culture. We now interact with diverse incoming channels to produce 'a rich orchestration of meaning' (Kress, 2011: 05.05). Not only is the visual more pervasive in communication but, also, we are much more accepting of the idea that visual and written (or spoken) texts will operate in unison. It started with our recognition that – at the simplest level – gestures and facial expressions accompany speech as part of the message. But with the proliferation of screens to be read, especially TV advertisements and websites, we are now required to master multimodal reading in order to know about our world. Kress talks about finding meaning 'where it is' (Kress, 2011: 05.17), on the page, using 'the whole page as an *integrated text*' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 177, their italics). The reading 'pathways' (where the eyes go) change from linear to spatially oriented in this new literacy, using codes of spatial and temporal composition for meaning-making (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 177). This changes the logic of how we put narratives together. In other words, we read and understand by synthesizing the variety of input modes that come in to us. By selecting, arranging and interpreting what we find most salient among the variety of incoming channels, we form our reading, our created 'text'. Clearly, these changes in reading require a new kind of writing.

In the book *Multimodality*, Kress starts his argument with a simple comparison between street signs (Kress, 2010: 1–4). The first sign, prominently attached to a wall at a set of London traffic lights, gives directions for drivers to get from there to a supermarket, directions which are complex because of access via one-way streets and an obscure entry point to the carpark. He explains that the information transmitted in the sign – which uses text, image and color to present its message – is nuanced to operate

multimodally because the sign would not work either as text alone or as image alone. Text and image together create the whole communication successfully.

But Kress shows another figure – an official sign explaining temporary parking arrangements during the European soccer championships in Salzburg in 2008. It is a printed poster attached to a blackboard-style A-frame, set on the footpath beside a busy road. This sign is typical of publications by official cultures which valorize the written text: ‘Bureaucracy assumes that as long as something has been announced in writing it has been communicated and the rest will look after itself’ (Kress, 2010: 2). The power of laws and tradition allows the Salzburg Traffic Office to rely on a non-sign, a single-mode communication.

I am tempted to use Kress’s comparison of signs as a metaphor for what is happening in universities teaching creative writing today, because so many creative writing courses occur in English departments. English departments, like the Salzburg Traffic Office, think they still have the power to insist on the single-mode written text as the definition of the novel. But like the soccer sign in the Salzburg street, the novel as monograph runs the risk of being less and less noticed by a new generation of readers moving on. Kress suggests that sign-writers, advertising agencies and web editors already know more about the reading and writing that will be done in the future than do English and creative writing departments. How much do teachers of creative writing – and the students we are teaching – know about writing multimodally? We all had difficulty when Barthes said the reader makes the story; now Kress tells us the new reader makes the story out of several modes of input.

Writing and literature have complex histories and we might go back to illuminated manuscripts as a multimodal form before the printing press, and how the first printed books carried on that tradition of multimodal illustration (e.g. Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* as printed by Caxton) before the burgeoning, bourgeois and commercially driven printing press eradicated the visual from adult literary reading. It seems the paper book (the codex) is to blame for the restrictions inherent in our monomodal reading capacity: all that sewing and gluing that holds everything together unrelentingly at the spine! The book sentenced us, it seems, to lives of reading in a linear fashion, page after numbered page, stuck between covers ... until the computer, html and hypermedia came along, until text and the page were liberated from ink, glue, sewing and the chronological.

Children were allowed images far earlier, followed by readers of comics, graphic novels, technical manuals and other popular-culture publications. As Kress and van Leeuwen note:

the layout of the densely printed page is still [in itself] visual, still carries an overall cultural significance, as an image of progress.... [Until the late 19th century] [l]ayout was not encouraged here, because it undermined the power of the densely printed page as, literally, the realization of the most literary and literate semiotic mode.... The genres of the densely printed page ... manifest the cultural capital ('high' cultural forms) controlled by the intellectual and artistic wing of the middle class. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 178–179)

This raises questions such as 'Will multimodal texts acquire the personal and cultural meaning that printed works of poetry, fiction, non-fiction and drama have?' and 'Shouldn't the construction of multimodal texts remain being taught in graphic arts and in entertainment design?' But also 'Should creative writing programs be more blended with such programs?'

It has been said that the older generation is grieving over the passing of the paper book and that we are still in the first stage of that process – *denial*. I agree with this. What we are also denying is the brilliant future of the book, the possibility that the multiply talented multimodal book can reach the literary heights we currently associate with the old form. But this is already happening. Not only do the recently released iPad versions of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (see Touch Press, 2013a), *The Wasteland*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *War Horse* and others like them provide exciting opportunities for enriched reading with an expanded set of creative possibilities, they also indicate the potential for multidisciplinary and cross-art-form creative writing teaching. Clearly, too, the paper novel has been strongly influenced: multimodal novels such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006), Reif Larsen's *The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet* (2009), Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) and *S* (2013) by J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst provide evidence that the multimodal can be employed in highly literate creative writing.

So, let me turn to teaching creative writing. What has been happening?

The rise of Creative Writing as a discipline in British and Australian universities in the 1990s and 2000s coincided with the rise of the computer and the internet. These two events are linked by the concept of interactivity. Hypertext showed readers that the reading process did not have to be passive. Of course, it never had been actually so – reading was always about interacting – reacting with one's intellect, imagination and emotions. But hypertext extended the possibilities beyond the limits of the *monograph* into realms which had previously involved further and separate acts of production – the incorporation of visuals, the adaptation to performance, the addition of commentary and glossing mechanisms. In the paper book

world, these extended possibilities were seen as value-added publishing, and were silo-ized into add-on categories. One publisher did the original novel. Another did the audio book. A third did the illustrated edition. A fourth published the author's exegetical essays. Yet others did critiques of the book. And so on.

*And we have taught writing in this way.* Making the original text is taught in the Creative Writing department and the critical text in the English department. The visuals, if we want to include them, have to be done in the Visual Arts department. And if we want to teach making an audio version, well, there are performance experts downtown in the Drama department.

With hypermedia, however, the illustrated book, the play or film based on the book, the talking book, the index or concordance, the exegetical and critical discussions of the book – as we see with the app book – can be part of the book itself. Clearly, now, the digital book can contain what was previously called research for, adaptation of, and extension to the text. This is the new definition of the book – a multimodal, multidisciplinary, multi-art-form entity. A multigraph, not a monograph. The idea of the text for the new book is encompassing; it involves many more awarenesses and potentially more skills. While this multifaceted text changes the way we read, it must change also the way we write and therefore the way we teach. The writer becomes a cog in a larger production process than before – more like a very empowered scriptwriter. And it's more about collaboration. It's as if teaching creative writing just grew into teaching the creative arts. This provides challenges.

To go back to my statement about the coincident rise of hypertext and creative writing in universities, I think students saw creative writing as itself the logical interactive response to a new kind of reading – in fact, they found writing to be a more logical response than learning cultural or literary theory as context for their reading. In her influential 2006 book *Reading Like a Writer*, Francine Prose makes the claim that students did not react well in the 1980s after

literary academia split into warring camps of deconstructionists, Marxists, feminists, and so forth, all battling for the right to tell students that they were reading 'texts' in which ideas and politics trumped what the writer had actually written. (Prose, 2006: 8)

The migration of students away from literary studies in the 1990s was a retreat from the imposed contextualization of the text in a theory environment and toward a new contextualizing in the digital environment, where reading was defined by the greater interactive capabilities of html. Creative

writing based on *doing*, as opposed to English based on *critiquing*, must have seemed more attractive in those circumstances as students recognized the changes in their own reading habits. The continuing migration of students from English courses to creative writing courses at undergraduate and post-graduate levels in the career fixated 2010s suggests that students take into account the new literacy and the vast audience for electronic platforms. Joseph Moxley says:

Technology matters.... If impact is a chief measure of success, then we can expect our students to seek access to the millions of online users as opposed to the one hundred or so people who might read an obscure literary print journal.... (Moxley, 2010: 237)

I tell my students how excited I am about who will write the first young adult novel to go to the top of the charts: it will be done by one of their generation – an iPad app novel about an emerging boy or girl band that has a soundtrack included. I wish I'd had such a possibility in my future when I set out as a young writer. They look at me with maybe a glimmer of the future in their eyes when I say: 'Why don't you write that as a multimodal novel on your iPhone? You've got a keyboard, a camera and a microphone pick-up.'

In the future, the writing, reading and teaching of new books cannot be the same – it will have to be multidisciplinary. Or at least have multi-arts and cross-arts awarenesses built in. The ideal department for a creative writing program will be a Creative Arts department where performance, visual arts, digital/new media arts and music are also taught. English should be housed there too. If the current unrepentant, slow-moving English departments don't catch up, they will have to move in with those dead Arts, History and Philosophy (although these, too, have great scope for flourishing in the digital age). While tightening my bullet-proof vest even further, I'll state that the English PhD is dead unless it becomes multi-arts oriented. Every doctoral submission in English should include a creative product – a work which shows that the lessons from reading have been truly learnt. And this begs the question: Why don't English departments just roll over into Creative Writing departments? Teaching English in the future is obliged to be different because fiction, poetry and performance – their genres, products and dissemination – are already different in the digital era.

The academic infrastructures we need for teaching writing in the future are significantly different from what we have now, and involve more collaboration between departments currently silo-ized and separated. This means more exposure for creative writing students to courses in other

creative arts areas. The scary thing for creative writing staff is that most do not have a cross-art-form background themselves. Creative Arts people in general don't like coming out from their silos because the academic silo is, after all, the garret protected by funding, teaching style and public relations potential. *If one of our Creative Writing students does well, we don't want to share her with the Visual Arts!*

There are universities already better set up for the new sort of creative writing teaching, while others are particularly vulnerable. Independent Creative Writing departments will need to decide their own strategies for the future, including linking with other Creative Arts and New Media departments in their vicinity. Where creative writing programs are part of an overarching and previously powerful English department, there will be problems if the formerly dominant partner, in pondering its viability, seeks to warp creative writing teaching back toward a failing critical-ideological pedagogy, as seems to be happening in the US with what is being called 'craft criticism' (Koehler, 2013; Mayers, 2005: 29–64). According to Mayers:

[t]he historical and material circumstances of craft criticism are the contemporary historical and material circumstances of English studies.... Craft criticism operates within the same system of exchange, reward, and marginalization as all of the other professional activities of English studies. (Mayers, 2005: 34)

In the UK and Australasia we understand what Mayers calls 'craft criticism' to be the exegesis, or exegetical studies. They developed out of the *writerly* approaches taken for teaching and supervision in creative writing programs, not out of the *readerly* interpretative approaches of English studies. Mayers defines craft criticism as 'part of the broader field of "criticism"' (Mayers, 2005: 35) and because of this we should be wary of craft criticism as a desperate rearguard action by English to impose its critical perspective on Creative Writing. This is exactly the kind of study that put English departments offside with students in the first place.

English departments are paper departments; they have difficulty doing the digital (Kirschenbaum, 2010; McGann, 2001). They also have difficulty doing the multimodal, since printed text alone is their speciality. Some few creative writing programs are already housed in multidisciplinary Creative Arts schools, where the notion of cross-art-form and digitally oriented programs works well. Clearly, multidisciplinary teaching is the way forward in dealing with the more-than-just-text-and-print-based writing of the future. We must teach the multimodal and its implications to creative writing students. This requires change.

## Exploration

- (1) Since 2000, a number of mainstream paper novels have incorporated visual elements. Students can explore the multimodal in fictions by Umberto Eco (2004), Jennifer Egan (2010), Jonathan Safran Foer (2006), Reif Larsen (2009) and W.G. Sebald (1995, 2001).
- (2) Reif Larsen, an MFA graduate of Columbia University and a teacher of creative writing, discusses techniques used in turning his acclaimed *The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet* from paper publication into an app novel in Larsen (2011). This perceptive article provides a writerly viewpoint on the possibilities of multimodal writing.
- (3) Histories of creative writing's involvement with the digital can be found in Henry Jenkins (2013), where fanzine writing is studied, and N. Katherine Hayles (2008), where pioneering hypertext fictions and other works associated with the Electronic Literature Organization are discussed.
- (4) Few experiments with the digital appear to be occurring in the creative writing classroom. Some articles which focus on digital poetry and memoir in college classrooms are included in Herrington *et al.* (2009). Hazel Smith (2005) also includes classroom exercises for creating mixed media, hypertext and hypermedia pieces.
- (5) The dark side of digital creative writing – including appropriation, mash-up and other potentially plagiaristic forms – is explored by Kenneth Goldsmith (2011) and Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss (2010).

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