Chapter 1

New Creative Writing “Classroom”: The Proliferation of Online Workshops and Low Residency Programs

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ABSTRACT

The field of creative writing studies includes commonly regarded forms of distance education such as online courses, but there is an impressive diversity regarding the opportunities available to creative writers. To illustrate this, the chapter discusses the two tracks available to writers. The first features the university environment, where students enroll in undergraduate and graduate creative writing degree programs. These programs could be full-residency, low-residency, or online. However, not all writers are able or willing to enroll in such programs. For these writers, there are non-academic options that are driven not by colleges and universities but by the publishing community. Non-degree writers might enroll in online workshops or communities. Finally, non-degree seeking writers might work independently through MOOCs, extension classes, iTunesU courses, and how-to texts. This chapter discusses the history of distance education as it is evolving and the potentially overwhelming number of options available to aspiring writers.

INTRODUCTION

The discipline of creative writing has been weary of scholarly research since its inception. While other disciplines within the umbrella of English departments, such as literary theory and composition studies, have embraced qualitative research for the better part of a century, creative writing research is limited to the last couple of decades. As a result, evidence regarding the history of distance education in creative writing is limited. Additionally, the definition of distance education in this field is more fluid than is often the case in others. Distance education encompasses more than online classes in creative writing. In fact, distance education could refer to education that is not even affiliated with colleges and universities. Those programs that are affiliated with colleges...
and universities often include low-residency requirements; in other words, distance education in creative writing is not limited to online courses.

Before discussing distance education in the field of creative writing further, it’s imperative to address potential variations from other fields, as I mentioned above. Aspiring authors and poets tend to choose between one of two tracks to pursue their writing goals, a phenomenon responsible for the title of the recently released creative writing text *MFA vs. NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction* (2014). For instance, writers might enroll in university system, consisting of undergraduate or graduate creative writing programs at colleges or universities, or they might join independent writing organizations, attend conferences and workshops, study how-to writing books, and work independently to develop their craft. Since these two tracks exist, it’s relevant to discuss both and the many distance education options for aspiring authors and poets. While the analysis of distance education in some fields refers primarily to online courses and programs, distance education in creative writing could include online education, low-residency programs, online workshops and discussion areas through non-academic writing organizations, iTunes U courses and other forms of open access education. Therefore, this chapter will fulfill the following objectives: 1. provide background information on creative writing, distance education in creative writing, and several of the distance education options available to aspiring novelists and poets, 2. provide examples of several options as well as their strengths and weaknesses, 3. make recommendations regarding how knowledge of these options and the history of distance education in creative writing could benefit writers struggling to find their path to writing success.

**BACKGROUND**

The history of creative writing is not as celebrated nor discussed as that of other English department disciplines. In fact, Wendy Bishop (1990) wrote “it often seems that creative writers have moved into the mainstream of English departments without understanding or reviewing their own history” (p. xi). In one of the few texts discussing the history of creative writing, *The Elephants Teach*, author D.G. Myers (1996) summarized the rise of creative writing programs.

> Creative writing emerged over the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth as a means for unifying the [then] two main functions of English departments—the teaching of writing and the teaching of literature. (p. xii)

While the main functions of English departments have since been refigured, contested, and theorized by several scholars, creative writing, on the other hand, is in the midst of refiguring, contesting, and theorizing.

Initially, creative writing was instituted to provide literature departments a new lens through which to view poetry and fiction; previously, literary works had been approached linguistically and historically (Myers, 1996). Scholars were hired to share their interpretations of the literature via lengthy lectures. In fact, students were not even required to read the literature on their own. Instead they listened to the lectures and gained knowledge about the works with their lecturing professors serving as lenses (Myers). “There was no discussion, no question period” and student involvement in the class was limited to recitation of various readings by the “teacher’s demand” (Brereton, 1995, p. 3). One aspect of the evolution of English departments was the rise of creative writing. Myers writes that in the 1920s and 1930s, creative writing “was perhaps the most widely adopted of the curricular reforms instituted by progressive education; in many ways it was the
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