Creative writing refers to the practice of writing prose fiction, poetry, scripts and sometimes auto/biography, chiefly in educational contexts. In fact, the primary association with creative writing courses is constitutive: outside education ‘creative writers’ usually refer to themselves simply as ‘writers’, and in bookshops ‘creative writing’ is not recognised as a general category such as Fiction, Non-Fiction, Biography and Poetry. The modern expansion and current consolidation of Creative Writing courses in and around English Literature represents one of the most significant transformations of the subject and has already been highlighted in the Prelude: Changing ‘English’ Now. The present entry concentrates on the theoretical-conceptual and practical-pedagogic dimensions of these key terms, rather than their broader institutional and intellectual histories (though the Reading below embraces both).

Creativity is here defined as the capacity to make something original and fitting, where ‘original’ can mean both ‘novel, innovative’ (its modern sense) and ‘going to the origin, essential’ (its ancient sense), and where ‘fitting’ means appropriate for some purpose and to some person. Creativity is therefore recognised to be something common as well as special, ordinary as well as extraordinary, collaborative as well as individual. These distinctions are important because creativity often gets loosely associated with notions of divine ‘creation from nothing’ (ex nihilo) on the one hand, and stereotypes of individual ‘geniuses’ – often male, sometimes mad – on the other.

Re-creation is here offered as a crucial bridging term. It refers to the fact that in practice creation always involves making something new out of something old and something else out of what already is. The stress is put firmly on active re-creation (as distinct from the relatively weak notion of ‘recreation’ meaning pastime, leisure activity) and deliberately draws on association with such concepts as re-vision, re-membering and re-collecting. All these ‘re-’ terms involve an insistent, often radical re-visiting and re-valuing of the past in the present in order to gesture to ways forward. Initially developed by writers such as Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Louis Gates to refer to the dual finding and making of traditions of women’s and black writing, such terms are now widely applied to all sorts of fictional and factual projects, in story and history. Re-creation is the corresponding term in the area of creativity. Like rewriting, it offers a bridge between the notions of reading and writing (see writing and reading). And like critique, it supplies a crucial linking term between creativity and criticism.

We now consider some instances of what actually goes on in creative writing classes. The following extract from the course description of a well-established Introductory Course in Creative Writing will help set the scene (with thanks to Tony Lopez and Paul Lawley at the University of Plymouth). The aims of the course are:

1 to introduce a range of writings as the basis for a study of composition
2 to establish a workshop that will foster students’ creative writing
3 to establish the importance of revision in the process of composition
4 to challenge commonplace notions of creativity and originality.
The assessed skills are: (a) research for writing; (b) writing practice; (c) critical self-reflection; (d) drafting, rewriting and editing. Clearly, then, the kinds of skill and knowledge cultivated are comparable to those on most ‘Literature’ courses. The only, and major, difference is in the emphasis: creative writing foregrounds one’s own writing rather more than writing about other people’s writing; doing it rather more than describing it. But otherwise the skills and knowledge involved are similar or complementary. They are not – or need not be – in conflict.

Having established a broad outline, here is some representative detail. Geoff Holdsworth’s ‘I call him Tuesday Afternoon’ (5.2.2) and Chan Wei Meng’s ‘I spik Inglish’ (5.1.4) were writing exercises produced in response to, respectively, Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (the ‘I call him Friday’ chapter, 5.2.2) and Caribbean texts including those by Scott and Nichols (5.4.4, 5.4.5). That is, strictly, they were rewriting activities. The students took an existing text and either systematically changed it (a little or a lot) or used it as a prompt for some writing of their own. Kinds of rewriting of classic texts and topics by established writers featured in the present book include:

- Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea, the classic prequel writing back to Brontë’s Jane Eyre in the light and shadow of later Caribbean culture, Rochester as coloniser and his Creole wife, Antoinette, as far more than merely ‘mad’ (5.2.3);
- Fanthorpe’s ‘Knowing about Sonnets’, a rewrite of Brooke’s ‘The Soldier’ partly in response to Eagleton (5.1.2);
- Bolam’s ‘Gruoch’, a realisation of Lady Macbeth in and on her own terms and with an authentic Gaelic name of her own (5.1.4);
- Coetzee’s novel Foe as a response to Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (also in 5.2.2), but now with a female castaway as narrator (Sue Barton), a tongueless, dancing Friday, a morose Crusoe and an elusively enigmatic author figure;
- Self’s novel Dorian as an updating and adapting of Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray for an increasingly AIDS-aware and video-tuned generation (5.2.3);
- Jones’s novel Mr Pip, putting Dickens’s Great Expectations at the heart of an informal literacy programme on a Pacific island ravaged by civil war (5.3.1).

Meanwhile, Atwood’s short story Happy Endings (5.2.1) offers a wide range of alternative endings. All these texts are re-creations in a more or less constrained or free sense: they extend from pastiche and parody through adaptation and critique to free-standing texts in their own right/write. Indeed a point at issue is how far these or any other texts are written entirely ‘in their own right’, and how far in some sense they always represent a response to other texts and a re-creation of one’s self through engagements with others. This is a principle of writing as practice no less than of dialogue and intertextuality as theory. To be sure, none of this need undermine the sense of uniqueness and wonder involved in creative activity; indeed, it may actually enhance it. But it should, in Lopez and Lawley’s phrase, ‘challenge commonplace notions of creativity and originality’.

With all this in mind, we look at a clutch of texts by the writer, performer, teacher and scientist Mario Petrucci (5.1.4). These were generated inside and outside educational and other institutions, including a laboratory and a museum. They may themselves be used as frameworks or prompts for work in creative writing classes; but they also gesture to words and worlds beyond. In this, crucially, they remind us that writing is creative and critical and that it takes place in, about, from and for a variety of actual and possible worlds. ‘The Complete Letter Guide’ (i) is an example of ‘cut-up’, a kind of ‘collage’. It draws together different parts of an early-twentieth century guide to writing letters for all occasions (the kind of guide Richardson’s epistolary
novel *Pamela* started off as). The various parts were selected and recombined, lineated and grouped as shown. ‘Mutations’ (ii), as the attached note indicates, is a kind of ‘computer-generated’ poem. It is what might happen if a computer engaged in random re-combination of the letters in the opening words of the nursery rhyme ‘Little Bo-Peep’. However, as Petrucci demonstrates, the apparently random nature of the process has been subject to design and crafting. This may be ‘chaos’, but it is informed by a variety of orders and logics (including that of genetic ‘mutations’, as the title suggests). As a consequence, by the close the reader has been treated to a curious cacophony of semi-Englishes (resonant of Dutch, Scots or something else, depending how you pronounce them) and a succession of variously innocent or salacious, half-sensical or non-sensical variants on a scheme. As with most poems, this one is best tried out on the tongue and ear as well as the eye, with an audience as well as to oneself. *Performance* is a crucial aspect of the ‘publication’ (i.e. making public) of creative writing; as is the showing and sharing of one’s work in progress in workshops. The same – palpably, orally, aurally – goes for Agbabi’s ‘The Word’ (5.1.5). Generated primarily for the poetry scene and on the performance circuit, it also circulates – and continues to resonate – in live educational contexts, printed text-books and web-sites such as this.

A sense of occasion and context is especially important with a site-specific text such as ‘Trench’ (iv). For this text, as the supporting notes explain, was composed for and in every sense sited (sighted, cited) in the Imperial War Museum, London. It is a particularly pointed instance of text in context and poetry as performance. ‘Occasional’, ‘installation’ pieces such as this can be generated with many specific locations and purposes in mind. Meanwhile, a more free-standing piece such as ‘Reflections’ (iii) sports with inversions and perversions of familiar phrases. ‘Sting like a bee’, ‘as tough as a nut’, and ‘harebrained schemes’ are all subjected to subtly different pressures. The result is a text which *de-familiarises* aspects of the world beyond, even as it draws attention to the artifice of its own deviant structures.

What really matters, then, is not whether we label such activities critical or creative, but the quality and value (see difference . . . re-valuation) of the experience generated by such experiments. In this respect, recalling the initial definition of creativity as the production of something ‘original and fitting’, a critical essay may be judged both whereas a poem may be judged neither. It all depends upon the kinds of re-creation or critique in play and what we expect or demand from the particular discourses and genres. A playful, punning essay by Derrida may be a source of delight or derision. So may the most solemn pronouncement by F.R. Leavis. Or me. Or you.

**Activities**

(a) **Draw on one of the texts, techniques or ideas featured above** as a prompt to fashion a text of your own. Then reflect on and write up the process.

(b) **Experiment with the problems and possibilities of both ‘free writing’ and ‘set writing’**. ‘Free writing’ means that you write down whatever comes into your head for, say, ten minutes, without pausing for more than a second or two to think what comes next (ignoring formal punctuation or sentence structures if you wish). *Set writing* means that you write with some specific constraint, purpose or topic in mind, whether formal or functional; for instance, you may write in a sonnet or haiku or ‘problem page’ form about something that happened last night (cf. 5.1.2 and @ 5.4.3 .2), or try to write in your mother’s or father’s voice, and so on. Having experimented
with both ‘free’ and ‘set’ writing, go on to consider what might be worked up from both; also to reflect upon just how creative, or re-creative, you judge the various processes and products to be.

Discussion

(i) The imagination imitates. It is the critical spirit that creates.

Oscar Wilde, *Intentions*, 1891.

(ii) I must create a system or be enslaved by another man’s.


(iii) Compare (a) ‘Your own life is the first source of your writing’.

(b) ‘Reading is the best source of inspiration’.

(Both from Jenny Newman *et al.* *The Writer’s Workbook* 2000: 3, 27.)

Also see: Prologue: English Literature and Creative Writing; LITERATURE; writing and reading, response and rewriting; Part Two, Critical and Creative Strategies for Analysis and Interpretation, esp. Further strategies for critical-creative writing, 2.3.3.


For further examples of Petrucci’s and Agbabi’s creative work, in and out of educational ‘English’ contexts such as the present one – along with their personal and critical reflections on the many processes and products involved – see Swann, Pope and Carter, 2011: 29—38, 113—128, 181—3. There is a specific case made for ‘Rewriting the Critical—Creative Continuum’ in the same volume, pp. 231—244.