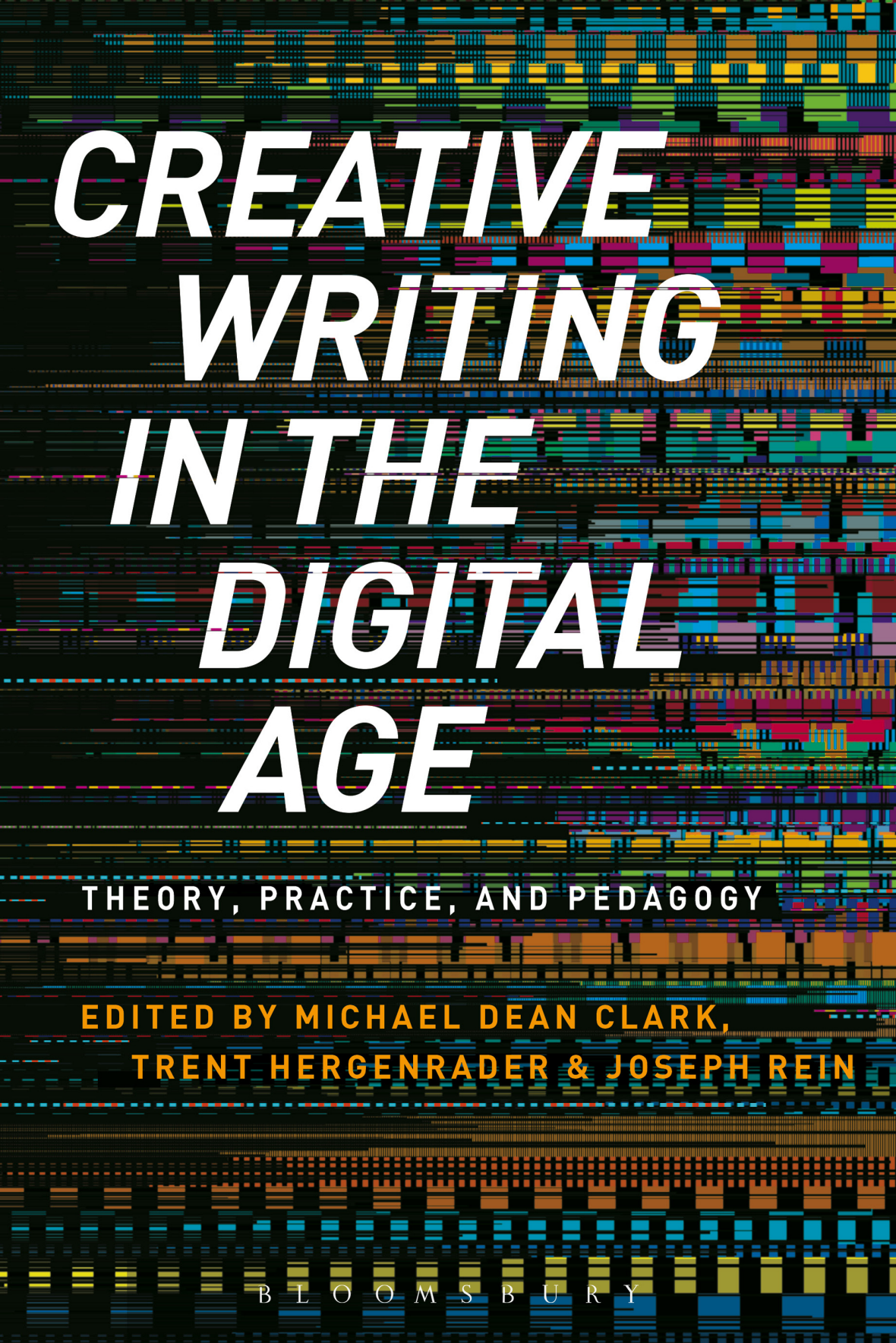
CREATIVE WRITING IN THE DIGITAL AGE
THEORY, PRACTICE, AND PEDAGOGY
EDITED BY MICHAEL DEAN CLARK, TRENT HERGENRADER & JOSEPH REIN
BLOOMSBURY

Creative Writing in the Digital Age

ALSO AVAILABLE FROM BLOOMSBURY

The Bloomsbury Introduction to Creative Writing by Tara Mokhtari
Creative Writing in the Community by Terry Ann Thaxton
Teaching Creative Writing edited by Graeme Harper

Creative Writing in the Digital Age

Theory, practice, and pedagogy

Edited by

MICHAEL DEAN CLARK, TRENT HERGENRADER, AND JOSEPH REIN

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

First published 2015

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4725-7407-7
PB: 978-1-4725-7408-4
ePDF: 978-1-4725-7410-7
ePub: 978-1-4725-7409-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India

Contents

1

Introduction

Michael Dean Clark, Trent Hergenrader, and Joseph Rein

Creative writing scholarship has experienced slow but steady growth and diversification since the turn of the millennium. Earlier, most articles pertaining to creative writing focused almost exclusively on craft-based issues. Fortunately, however, the past two decades have produced more scholars willing and eager to address the long-overdue work of examining pedagogical practice and theorizing the creative writing classroom. Of course, craft concerns will always be central to the discipline; however, this recent wave of scholarship asks more fundamental questions that analyze the purpose and effectiveness of creative writing pedagogical models. Where there were once only a handful of books—among them, Joseph M. Moxley's *Creative Writing in America*, Hans Ostrom and Wendy Bishop's *Colors of a Different Horse*, D. G. Myers's *The Elephants Teach*—instructors now have a wide variety of texts that focus exclusively on creative writing both as a discipline and as classroom practice. Where essays on creative writing pedagogy used to appear only in broader English journals, they can now be read in *New Writing*, a journal focused exclusively on the issue of creative writing theory and practice. Creative writing studies have advanced because of the work done by scholars such as Heather Beck, Paul Dawson, Diane Donnelly, Katherine Haake, Graeme Harper, Jeri Kroll, Tim Mayers, Kelly Ritter, Carl Vandermeulen, and Stephanie Vanderslice. Among others, they have expanded the possibilities of teaching in the field by presenting new and exciting avenues for the future.

And yet, despite this surge in creative writing scholarship, very few works deal with the profound impact digital technology has on our discipline. Simply put, creative writing remains more doggedly reliant on, and rooted in, print culture than almost any other discipline. The genres with which creative writers primarily engage—poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and in some programs, drama—are often viewed and studied as disparate from those "digital" genres: multimodal presentations, fan fiction, social media posts, digital narratives, wikis, and blogs, just to name a few. This happens despite the fact that all these genres contain similar craft concerns creative writing instructors already discuss in their classrooms.

Creative writing has been hesitant to join other writing disciplines, such as rhetoric and composition and professional writing, that have recognized the importance of digital influences and have theorized how these technologies impact their writing classrooms. Perhaps this is because creative writing instructors feel the digital tools themselves are intricate, hard to master, and ever changing. And, of course, this is true. But rather than conceiving them as an obstacle, creative writers ought to view digital tools as providing an opportunity for students to broaden their creative skill set. Creative writing has been—and always should be—about exploration and play, two linchpins of creative work in the digital realm. Regardless of the composing tools students use, the fundamental tenets of creative expression, be it precise language, narrative, or self-reflection, will always remain.

Creative Writing in the Digital Age seeks to redress this situation, challenge this hesitancy, and mark a starting point for a new line of discussion in creative writing pedagogy. This collection seeks to enter the ongoing conversations surrounding digital creative writing from a variety of avenues, addressing both theoretical concerns and practical applications. Our contributors include both prominent scholars in creative writing studies as well as groundbreaking scholars working in digital literature. These contributors present myriad approaches intended to inspire both the novice and the expert, to encourage the use of both simple tools and innovative technologies. Creative writing instructors, not only in the United States but also in Great Britain and Australia, are already experimenting with digital tools in fascinating ways; as a discipline, we simply haven't talked enough about it. More than anything, we hope this collection gets people talking.

The collection is divided into two sections. The first, "Digital influences on creative writing studies," contextualizes the impact of the digital age on our discipline. Graeme Harper's opening essay "Creative writing in the age of synapses" focuses on the ways in which the discipline might be reenvisioned as a "synaptic" digital response system in tune with life in a digital world. Adam Koehler's "Screening subjects: Workshop pedagogy, media ecologies, and (new) student subjectivities" discusses the need to reconstitute the

writing workshop in light of both the digital humanities and posthuman theory, leading to a better understanding of twenty-first-century students/writers. In "Concentration, form, and ways of (digitally) seeing," Anna Leahy and Douglas Dechow balance using various facets of technological platforms in the classroom while still focusing on craft principles central to poetry writing. Next, Trent Hergenrader's "Game spaces: Videogames as story-generating systems for creative writers" argues that instructors can use students' knowledge of videogame narratives to reconfigure the classroom and push student writing in new directions. In a similar vein, Michael Dean Clark posits in "The marketable creative: Using technology and broader notions of skill in the fiction course" that ideas from sources as diverse as engineering, business, and network theory can be used to broaden student writing and skill. To conclude the section, Joe Amato and Kass Fleisher, in "Two creative writers look askance at digital composition (crayon on paper)," inquire about disciplinary ownership of multimodal writing and how we might tackle the question of aesthetics in new media forms.

The second section, "Using digital tools as creative practice," explores practical classroom applications for digital instruction. Joseph Rein's essay "Lost in digital translation: Navigating the online creative writing classroom" explores best practices for teaching creative writing online, a quickly growing trend in creative writing programs at both the undergraduate and the graduate levels. Janelle Adsit takes on the issue of creative writing, identity, and technology in "Giving an account of oneself: Teaching identity construction and authorship in creative nonfiction and social media," showing how students can expand their concept of characterization through exploring their already-existing online personas. In "Reconsidering the online writing workshop with #25wordstory," Abigail Scheg discusses social media microblogs as a focused workshop environment that can dissolve the walls between the classroom and the wider literary community. In the first of three speculative pieces, "Writing with machines: Data and process in Taroko Gorge," James J. Brown Jr. argues that working with executable computer code is actually quite similar to writing within the constraints of formalist poetics and demonstrates how such limitations focus student attention on language. Aaron A. Reed draws on similar experiences in "Telling stories with maps and rules: Using the interactive fiction language 'Inform 7' in a creative writing workshop." In the essay, he posits that the procedural rules required by a programming language require students think more deeply about setting and characterization. In "Acting out: Netprov in the classroom," Rob Wittig and Mark C. Marino bring performance into the classroom with Netprov (or Networked Improvisational Narrative) that blurs the line between audience and participants during the generation of unpredictable, interactive narratives. Christina Clancy discusses the ways digital storytelling platforms have challenged and improved the

personal narratives of her creative nonfiction students in "The Text Is Where It's At: Digital Storytelling Assignments That Teach Lessons in Creative Writing." And finally, Amy Letter's "Creative writing for new media" gives an honest and accessible account of the successes and challenges of using new media in the creative writing classroom.

The book also has a companion website, available through Bloomsbury's homepage. On the site, each author has provided additional lesson plans, ideas, and assignments to augment the ideas discussed in the essay. We also urge readers to check out our social media sites, where instructors can share their successes and struggles with digital approaches. We hope, above all, that this collection becomes the starting point of a lively and consistent conversation within the discipline about embracing and engaging the powerful opportunities technology provides.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge that the digital world opens opportunities not only for our creative writing classrooms but also for collaborations both campus-wide and beyond. The digital humanities continues to grow at universities both in the United States and abroad; creative writing can, and should, play a central role in its evolution. Scholars and students working in fields from computer science to graphic design continue to build projects around compelling content; who else are better to give these projects the artistic resonance and deft use of language they need than creative writers? We suggest contacting colleagues in on campus to inquire about working on interdisciplinary projects, guest lecturing in each other's classes, or co-teaching a course. Creative writers may never master writing code and programmers may never master literary forms, but both sides have much to gain from active collaboration. Far from diminishing the discipline, such collaborations will bolster creative writing as a discipline, while continuing its vital work in the modern university.

SECTION ONE

Digital influences on creative writing studies

2

Creative writing in the age of synapses

Graeme Harper

Making the change

The world changed, many people noticed, but not many reacted. Further focusing on such a comment will certainly appear accusatory, and yet I will. Alongside changes in ways of reading, the writing and distribution of works of creative writing changed. Many people noticed, but only a very small percentage of those teaching creative writing reacted to these changes. Because of that, much in the teaching of creative writing continues to address a predigital world rather than the environment in which we now live, learn, and teach. Fortunately, some of us have noticed this has happened and are beginning to do something about it.

The specific phenomenon we need to target today clearly owes its origins to digitalism. It has arisen out of digitalism to be our contemporary *modus operandi*, the ethos of our era, our guide, and in many ways, our gift. We can refer to this phenomenon as "synapticism."

Synaptic technologies are those contemporary technologies that support reciprocal human experiences, not material manifestations, of our human presence in the world. That is, they are technologies of action and experience, not primarily technologies associated with materialism. Depending on the specific device, these contemporary technologies were born when the sometimes immediate and sometimes gradual changeover from analog to

digital technologies generated opportunities for more direct, accessible, domesticated, and reciprocal human connections (or what can be called "interconnection").

Certainly, such synaptic technologies *can* produce material results; that is, they can be used to produce artifacts (in the case of creative writing, such artifacts as novels, poems, scripts). But these technologies are not, in essence, about materiality. Rather, they are about the human experiences they initiate, support, and empower. They empower these in interconnected ways. So, for example, texting on a cell phone does not primarily produce words on a small screen. True, this material element is obvious and undeniably relevant. But it is secondary to the cell phone's support for an experience of reciprocal human connectedness, often combining this with a sense of immediacy and almost always involving a personal and interactive conversation between persons.

The developed world in the twenty-first century is one of technological interfaces with human experiences. Synaptic technologies, or what might thus be also called *experience technologies*, produce and support opportunities for human interaction and interconnection, well beyond the local or regional geography of direct physical contact, at a pace of experience and level of convenience never before accomplished. Indeed, include here the technologies of the cell phone and the internet; in fact, include all those contemporary digital technologies that offer experiential opportunities. They each might also initiate and/or support material results, but that is not the primary consequence.

As the name suggests, synapticism involves a network of reciprocal connections or junctions, and synaptic technologies are those that allow such connections to operate. Synapses are openings or bridges. They are nodes in a network. These networks are not based in linearity. By being structured in a nonlinear fashion, networks of this kind support and both literally and metaphorically encourage nonlinear thinking and acting.

Digitalism, as we most often consider it today, is associated specifically with the arrival and rapid spread of digital media technologies toward the latter part of the twentieth century. This contemporary instance is not the only instance of the digital in human history. The digital has a wider definition and the digital technologies we associate with our contemporary world are distinct to our era. That said, digitalism generally means the bringing together of discrete interrelated entities rather than a continuous connected linear flow in one direction. It involves joining together to create interconnected experiences and the opportunity for nonlinearity. So, for example, digital sound technologies produce less distortion because an increase in capacity can be addressed by adding more data units at points in a sequence, whereas analog sound technologies rely on maintaining a continuous linear flow, and

thus the likelihood of distortion rises with increases in the size of material to be stored.

Nonlinearity means an opportunity to combine more or interconnect greater, and to do so successfully. That these additions might not be in a single line of connectivity is exactly what the definitions of nonlinearity and interconnection suggest. But there are other things here as well.

In creative writing pedagogy, imagine a set of activities, encouragements, and alignments that were not fixed on an end result—that is, actions that relate to the learning of ways, modes, understandings, and relationships; in essence a creative writing pedagogy that is about the interconnectedness of human action. Whereas linear creative writing pedagogics predominantly rely on notions of material completion, achievement defined by reaching a material end point, nonlinear pedagogics can produce a wider variety of results in the area of creative writing understanding and knowledge. In this way, nonlinearity makes more of the aspects that all of us involved in creative writing have always recognized. Nonlinearity does not necessarily reduce the goal-directed, or teleological, nature of much of our human action. Humans often act with goals in mind, even if those goals can occasionally be short term, badly conceived, or in the realm of the unconscious. But nonlinearity highlights human actions that linear-based technologies couldn't easily highlight.

First, nonlinearity affirms that teleology in creative writing relates both to extrinsic and intrinsic ends and values. Extrinsic ends and values in that the goal might still be to produce final artifacts, whether poems, plays, novels, or some other end or final result. Intrinsic in that the actions that make up creative writing are valuable goals in themselves, that is, the explorations and understanding that come from such exercises. Any teacher of creative writing (and I say this based solely on anecdotal evidence, but with a degree of confidence) will confirm that intrinsic goals in creative writing have value, whether during the production of drafts, writing of pieces of exploratory but unfinished material, reciprocal communications with family or friends about works-in-progress, investigations through doodles or sketches, diary entries, or any and all of our students' actions, thoughts, and imaginative engagements.

Unfortunately, it is the extrinsic goals of creative writing, not the intrinsic ones, that have been promoted and most discussed culturally in the modern period—the period in which the sale of products emerging out of creative writing became tantamount, that is, primarily from the eighteenth century to the later twentieth century. During this time, the intrinsic goals were often ignored, downplayed, misunderstood, or misrepresented. Because of this, we saw such things as the elevation of the notion that to understand creative writing you had to read certain kinds of written works most often defined as "literature," that you had to study these to be able to value and

ultimately understand the actions of undertaking creative writing generally, and equally that your creative endeavors were most worthy if you produced certain kinds of finished works and less worthy if you did not. We might ask whether this is a misrepresentation or a misunderstanding of its intrinsic nature, or both. Additionally, we might ask if my assessment is overly harsh because material results *are* of course part of the undertaking of creative writing and so, in that sense, not extrinsic. Nevertheless, such value judgments often had something of the extrinsic about them, being located in the material artifact rather than in the undertaking and experience of creative writing itself.

When teaching creative writing, many of us continue to emphasize reaching a final material condition more than the intrinsic aspects of the practice. It would not be unfair to say that many still teach as if a final material object is paramount and the intrinsic, though so often recognized, valued, and discussed (even if only informally), is left to occupy a liminal space. These teachers often clearly recognize the intrinsic but cannot attend to it in their teaching or in their declarations of the learning outcomes of this teaching. The reason for that relates as much to the impact of physicalism on contemporary education as it does to any criticism of those creative writing teachers. There is so often a stated obligation to produce tangible, measurable, and fixed final results.

Secondly, both digitalism and creative writing involve multiple levels of human engagement and action, not only action and artifacts we can see but the movements of memory and individual writer disposition: further too, the interaction of immediate stimuli with plains of reference that draw from previous experience or even projected experience founded on personality or dream or cognitive leaps of faith. Such a highlighting makes inroads into recognizing the relationship between the creative and the critical and into seeing these as interconnected modes of human engagement with the world. In other words, creativity and critical thought are reciprocally connected, more like each other than they are separate from each other.

Synaptic technologies have thus supported a significant and exciting challenge to the narrow thrust of the modern period. If space has been traversed by digital communication and time has been challenged—or, in the sense declared by Henri Bergson a century ago,[1] *real* time has been better approached and understood—has the condition of the world thus been irreversibly altered? Certainly, space can no longer be considered in the same way when virtual space has become as real to human sight and hearing as physical space? Equally, real time is surely no longer the same when the interconnected digital world of communication runs 24 hours a day in every time zone of the world and simultaneously we can visit these—whether by tablet computer, cell phone, or however else—and be present there, elsewhere, in some other time, while remaining in our own time, in our

own chronology. Surely, these situations are different to those experienced prior to the end of the twentieth century, prior to our contemporary synaptic technological period.

Imagine more actively addressing this as an analog both for the undertaking of creative writing and for creative writing pedagogics: so, rather than fixed points of entry and determined material results, interconnectedness, which can be defined as reciprocal connectedness. The learner and the teacher thus enter their conversation as an exchange that is bound only by seeking out some forward movement in understanding. Imagine if this is borne also, as is the world of synaptic technologies generally, on exploring and contextualizing the experience of making works. Imagine exiting this conversation (if only because of the limitations of formal educational semesters or years) with results defined nevertheless according to a network of discoveries. For example,

- Student 1 improved his or her knowledge of modes of patterning in prose;
- Student 2 came to a greater understanding of structure and form;
- Student 3 advanced his or her overall work in relation to voice and tone;
- Student 4 improved compositional chronology, reconsidering productively the sequence of his or her writing process;
- Student 5 reexamined assumptions about the audience for his or her finished works.

And so on. If perhaps we have not seen a change in the properties of space and time from the point of view of physics, mathematics, and mechanics, we have certainly seen a change in space and time from the point of view of human perception, human ideals, and human attitudes. Surely there should therefore be an aligned transformation in our creative writing pedagogies.

Creative writing and synapses

What Daniel Bell[2] and others described as "post-industrial society," arriving as it did toward the end of the twentieth century, made much of a refocusing of societies to highlight both creativity and knowledge. Creative writing has always involved a heightened sense of both these and incorporated synaptic ways of acting and thinking upon them. Logically, then, we are here at the beginning of a time in which creative writing will more likely be included in general discussions of human knowledge, more regularly, and with the opportunity for its practices to be knowledgeably explored and

better understood. Of course, I mean the inclusion and understanding of the actions that constitute creative writing not just as recognition of the final artifacts that emerge from it, which has been a constant of the modern period.

There is absolutely no evidence that the kind of inscription that writing involves, and the activities we undertake to produce these inscriptions, is undertaken by any other creature on the planet. Writing is clearly and entirely human. As a species, we have thus spent much time on the relationship between our spoken and written communications. The spoken word has been valued for such things as its immediacy, spontaneity, and ability to address changing needs and the fluidity of daily activities, while the written word has been valued, very often, for its persistence over time, solidity, definitiveness, and often formality. Creative writing has been awkwardly placed in this relationship, not because its modes of inscription have been different from those of other writing—largely, they are not—but because of the willingness of creative writing to unsettle writing intentions and attitudes.

Creative writing is all about writing released from conditions of formality, accuracy, clarity, agreed address, or aspects of recognizable voice. To say this could be seen to be disingenuous, because creative writing does often deal with accuracy and clarity, and its artifacts do have aspects of formality about them. But the point is that the intention of any act of creative writing is not to firm up convention but to put convention into a form of relief, to challenge, even in the most conservative of outcomes of creative writing, our expectations of something, of form, of content, of structure, of outlook, of voice, and more.

Thus, creative writing has always by necessity been an interconnected synaptic activity, one that looks to associate multiple plains of reference, the literal and the metaphoric, the current and the historical or the future: a human activity that seeks junctions and conjunctions, bringing together emotions with observations, speculations with discoveries, the personal and individual with the public and cultural. All art does these things to an extent. However, creative writing is the only art that does these things and uses writing as its primary tool.

Given the significance of written communication in our perpetual human sense of the world, even that unique feature of creative writing alone would make such a practice a likely highlight of the digital age. But if we usher in a period in which creativity and new forms of knowledge—the key components of post-industrialism—are socially, economically, and personally heightened, then the advantageous position of creative writing—with its eclecticism, its conjoining of the personal and the cultural, its history of incorporation into the industries of publishing, entertainment, the media and performance—in relation to our age becomes abundantly clear.

Finally, teaching synaptically

The period in which we live—which could even now be called the "postdigital age" if we are to take the technologies of the past 10 years to have actively refined and built upon digitalism—has intensified space and time transformations. It has made nonlinearity a literal and metaphoric guide to human understanding and interconnection. Thus, we have an increase in reciprocal connections relating to individual and group empowerment and choice, nodes of access and support for experiences that often arrive instantly and dwell in personal as well as cultural space. Such experiences go well beyond immediate surroundings, well beyond a sequential narrative of day-to-day. They give a stronger ontological voice to the conditions of creative writing that those who engage with creative writing have long known to be real and important.

In light of all this, if it is to advance or even to be truly relevant, creative writing teaching must evolve to embrace the condition of our synaptic world, in the many instances where it has not done so already. Doing so will result in improved understanding, as well as greater learner and teacher empowerment. In this, the intrinsic teleology of creative writing must be brought to the fore, so that the practice is understood as human action and the artifacts it produces are understood as evidence of a distinct human practice. Because creative writers spend something like ninety percent of their time engaged in the actions that constitute creative writing, consider then a creative writing class in the synaptic world where most of the interactions are related to action. Consider such things as defining creative writerly choice according to the selection of techniques and applications, not according to the judgments beginning with final artifacts; undertaking comparative explorations of sequential action, what might often be called the compositional components of drafting; and, using our interconnected world to explore action and response between writer and audience.

Final artifacts produced by creative writers are often things of great aesthetic worth and beauty; they might capture in the form of a written artwork aspects of human life, existence, belief, and understanding that touch us very deeply and inform us greatly. But these are not creative writing: they are some of its evidence. Because of the reflective alignment between creative writing and digitalism, creative writing has never been so obviously something that we humans use to explore and articulate our sense of life and the world. To teach in our age, to teach synaptically, we must:

1. Keep in focus the intrinsic value and goals of creative writing as well as the extrinsic situations, factors, and representations of creative writing.

2 Create courses that do not rely on final artifacts to confirm the level of achievement and the level of knowledge, but rather that see those artifacts as part of the evidence trail of writerly action.

3 Recall that digital technologies as we know them are distinct to our age, but that digitalism is not. The particular kinds of digital technologies that have brought about our contemporary sense are technologies promoting, supporting, and developing experiences.

4 Know that creative writing, too, is experience and the artifacts that emerge during and at the end of any instance of creative writing capture only a relatively small portion of the total experiences that ensued during the creative writing. Teach to the experiences. Raise the potential for seeing how our action informs, and the evidence of that action and any artifacts that emerge from it.

5 Recognize the multiple layers of experience, observation, and knowledge that creative writing involves—not least in its bringing together of creative and critical understanding. Creative writing draws from all of human discourse and engagement in the world.

6 Teach with synapses in mind. We know that all creative writers have potential avenues of exploration in front of them, and that digital technologies have opened up the possibility of synapticism and the volume of reciprocal human connections. Teach to empower the creation of conjunctions and meeting places, of opportunities to create bridges that might draw into play new possibilities in their work.

7 Teach to emphasize the role of particular writing situations that define creative solutions. Whether in relative freeform explorations, or whether the final results are being explored as end points presented with elements of formal expectation, teach to show that, just as in our reciprocal interactions with others, the situation defines the solution. Many times a writing situation can be approached with any number of solutions.

8 Avoid the idea that the classroom—whether physical or virtual—defines the parameters of action. Creative writing is action beyond and across boundaries. Such is the nature of the creative, but such also is the nature of the digital (nonlinear and connective, elements brought together for a purpose), and such boundary crossings only assist in developing critical understanding.

9 Finally, allow for the learning and teaching of creative writing to take the routes that action defines. In the digitally informed world, where