

Vision and Revision: The Whys and Hows of Employing Creative Writing Pedagogy in the College Classroom

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Visions

Last semester, one of my Introduction to Creative Writing students said something to the tune of: “You know, creative writing is really improving my academic writing. I’m paying a lot more attention to how I am selecting my words, and writing is coming more easily to me.” I am sure I responded matter-of-factly with my standard truism: “The only way you will improve your writing is by writing.” However, this exchange got me wondering: “What is the link between creative writing and students’ improvement in academic writing?” This paper will touch upon some of my discoveries as I seek to answer this question. Not surprisingly, I have found that students’ academic writing improves when they also engage in creative writing activities.

However, my research on Creative Writing (CW) pedagogies has also altered how I believe college writing should be instructed. In several Anglophone countries, creative writing classes are offered in lieu of, or before, academic writing classes are taught. Especially in vocational colleges or in technical universities, but also in other institutions of higher education (HE), first-year students in Australia and the UK take some sort of creative writing course designed to assist them in developing their creative thinking processes while also honing their

writing skills. Meanwhile, “academic writing” courses are frequently taught later in their “programmes” since academic writing has already been taught to university students prior to their entrance in the HE system. According to Giovanna Lucarelli-Mittiga, who received her BA from the University of Birmingham in the UK, college-bound students take Advanced Level subjects (A-Levels) prior to entering the university system. While preparing for their A-Levels, students focus on gaining analytical skills when reading, and learn “all of the skills which I assume are meant to be learnt in composition English classes” (personal interview). Since their university system is so different from ours, and there are many other HE tracks that students can take (e.g., vocational, technical), by the time students enter universities in the UK, they have presumably gained some skills necessary for college-level writing.

While I cannot logically propose a complete overhaul to our HE system in the United States, I can say that since writing this paper my vision has become clearer: College writing classes should include CW pedagogical practices. Students who struggle with grammar, spelling, mechanics, and other common writing challenges, as well as students who dread writing essays, can improve their academic writing skills through participation in creative writing classes or activities. For this reason and others, I believe that college writing programs in the United States should consider changing their approaches to writing instruction. I believe that our students would benefit from participating in writing programs that borrow pedagogies already in place in the United Kingdom, Australia, and elsewhere.

Creative Writing Improves Academic Writing

All writing is creative writing. Or is it? The differences (and similarities) between genres of writing have been explored by compositionists and CW pedagogues in myriad studies. I have neither the time, nor the desire, to take that route. Rather, as suggested by the title of Tim Mayers' germinal book (*Re) Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*, while creative writers and compositionists "begin from several different perspectives, and arrive at positions that are sometimes in conflict" both approaches "actively question and challenge received boundaries" (94). Certainly, contemporary Rhetoric and Composition theorists and CW pedagogues are interested in the writer's relationship to language, technology and received knowledge (Mayers 95). But can both compositionists and creative writers achieve similar ends through disparate means? In his article "Why all Writing is Creative Writing," Scottish CW pedagogue David McVey says "yes." In his classroom, McVey deploys creative writing practices to help students who are challenged by what he calls "problems of ability" (191). These students are unsure about spelling, structure, mechanics, and "have particular difficulty with academic writing"; McVey also uses creative writing practices to help students who suffer from what he terms as "problems of engagement." These students do not enjoy writing, and see it "as a chore, at best as a means to the ends of marks, merits, passes, awards" (191). While McVey broadly defines creative writing as "any writing, from the published instructions for using a power drill to the most esoteric literary poetry" that "uses the raw materials of language, experience, knowledge, textual sources" (289), I believe that, for the purposes of my discussion, creative writing should be limited to fiction, poetry, drama, and

creative nonfiction. When a student enrolls in a Creative Writing course or is asked to write creatively in a composition classroom, she usually expects to be engaging with reading and writing assignments related to one of these four genres.

I have previously written extensively on the benefits of using first-person narratives in the college classroom to improve students' writing skills, as well as their health and well-being. In my Ph.D. program at the University of South Florida, I developed and frequently taught (over the span of five years) a 300-level course entitled "Expository Writing through Life-Writing." In this class, students wrote personal narratives to fulfill the university's curricular goal: to teach "the techniques for writing effective prose, (excluding fiction), in which student essays are extensively criticized, edited, and discussed in individual sessions with the instructor and with peers."¹ Several chapters in my dissertation as well as my scholarship for the past sixteen years has explored how and why we can and should honor our students' subjectivities and listen to their voices in the college classroom. I have argued that reading and writing personal narratives enables students to become emotionally invested in the texts they are reading and in the quality of the writing they are producing. My scholarship was initially based on the findings of social psychologist James Pennebaker, who established the connection between practicing self-reflective writing and experiencing an improvement in physical and mental health and well-being. Pennebaker also concluded that self-reflective writing improves students' overall academic performance. In fact, Pennebaker found through experimenting with control groups in history and Social Psychology classes, that class discussions which followed ten-minute self-reflective writing assignments were "rich, with students contributing interesting and insightful

comments on topics they previously could not relate to. In addition, absentee rates dropped and performance on essay exams improved dramatically” (qtd. in Moran). I include low stakes self-reflective reader response journals, personal narratives, and/or quizzes in all my classes—ranging from Creative Writing to Honors Writing Seminars to Women’s and Gender Studies surveys to literature classes—to aid students’ mastery of course material and to prepare students for class participation and discussion.

Certainly, student engagement and enthusiasm in courses where their emotions, ideas and feedback are valued has been explored through a variety of writing pedagogies. However, one place where CW pedagogies differ from the more traditional forms of college essays and academic writing is in their focus on creativity. In “From Imagination to Creativity,” Australian CW pedagogue Paul Dawson explores the trajectory of “the reproductive imagination” (23) from its Romantic era naissance to its contemporary definition “as the mental capacity to produce something new and valuable” (45). Dawson believes that creative writing classes are more than sites where expressive writing takes place. Rather, he envisions CW courses as places where “connotations of divergent, lateral and problem-solving thinking would be beneficially acknowledged” and where a literary work is produced that “will be seen to have a logic to its composition and thus be a new and valuable contribution to literature” (47). More practically speaking, I believe that tapping into students’ creative intelligence frees them from the writer’s block and the lack of investment they oftentimes experience in more traditional composition classes. This can be seen vividly in a study detailing an advanced-level ESL college writing course in which CW pedagogical practices were employed “to address the issue of engagement,

boost student confidence . . . and increase writing fluency” (Arshavskaya 68). At the end of the course, creative writing assignments were shown to have fostered “greater motivation and engagement with writing,” and to have motivated students to conduct additional research and consult with peers and friends on topics discussed in class (Arshavskaya 75). Through my 20+ years as a college writing teacher, I have found that regardless of what class I am teaching, students become more involved in and aware of their own writing processes when they are invested in choosing the “right words” to make themselves understood. Or, in the words of esteemed CW pedagogue Wallace Stegner: “All a teacher can do is set high goals for students—or get them to set them for themselves—and, then, try to help them reach those goals” (72). I am convinced that deploying CW pedagogical practices in the college classroom can help students succeed as college writers and thinkers.

Creative Writing Pedagogies in Anglophone Countries

Creative Writing classes are part and parcel of first year students’ curriculum in the UK and Australia. Accordingly, CW instruction in these countries’ colleges and universities has skyrocketed in recent years. As noted by McVey in 2008, “Creative Writing (CW) departments, courses, programmes and degrees are being introduced at an astonishing rate. Harris (2006, p. 44) reported 140 undergraduate, 70 Master’s and 20 Ph.D. CW programmes in the UK” (McVey 289). Similar enrollment gains and structural changes have been made in Australia. Dawson writes that during the mid-1970s, Australian schools of higher education split into two systems: universities that focused on research “and the dissemination of knowledge”; and “a vocational

sector concentrating on teaching and professional training” (144). Shortly thereafter, three-year Professional Writing degrees were developed for the students in the vocational/technical tract. Rather than “offering strict rhetorical training in various modes of composition,” this degree included offerings in the field of journalism, copywriting, scientific and technical writing, fiction, poetry, drama and scriptwriting (Dawson 145). By the 1990s, technical and vocational colleges, as well as universities throughout Australia, offered CW programs. Several Australian universities even allowed students the option to write a creative dissertation for their masters degree (Dawson 156). Paul Gardiner notes that an emphasis on creative thinking is found in a number of national curriculum documents in both Australia and the UK. Creative writing skills are paired with critical thinking skills as a general capability in Australia, and are included as a cross-curricular key skill in the UK (117). Clearly, creative writing and thinking is of paramount importance in other Anglophone countries’ national curricular goals and institutions of higher education.

A quick perusal of the English department’s home page from the University of Birmingham illustrates just how prominently CW pedagogy is incorporated into the British university system. In the first year of their three-year BA in English program, students are given “grounding in the major historical periods and genres of literature,” are invited to engage with a variety of authors and texts, “encounter new ways of thinking about literature” and “improve analytical and writing skills.” They also “have the opportunity to explore areas of creative practice.” In their second year, students take an “innovative Shakespeare module” and have the opportunity to take part in a residential trip to Stratford-upon-Avon to work at the Institute and

benefit from the university's connections with the Royal Shakespeare Company. In their second and third years, students are "able to tailor the course" to suit their interests "with increasing flexibility." Students also have the option of combining "literary study with one of several disciplines by choosing to take a Creative Pathway: Creative Writing, Drama, Film and English Language."² Who wouldn't want to major in English after reading this webpage? (And could our lack of curricular freedom and imagination, and dare I say "creativity," be some of the contributing reasons for the decline of students majoring in English in the United States?)

Deploying Creative Writing Pedagogies

While I do not see universities in the United States scrapping their composition programs anytime soon (after all they generate income for the English department and provide work for faculty members and graduate assistants), I believe the way we teach writing to first- and second-year students needs to change. Academic writing should be taught *after* students have found their voices and gained confidence in their writing skills. McVey's suggestions for making students comfortable with written expression regardless of whether they are taking a composition or a creative writing course are valuable. He recommends encouraging students "to write outside their studies, to keep a diary, write a blog, add content to a personal website or take part in online chat, in order to remove the mystique from the art of creating meaning through written symbols" (293). Other CW pedagogues have noted that while creative and academic writing enjoy their own styles and conventions, elements of the writing process are shared (Antoniou and Moriarty 157). However, writing teachers should be cautioned that

maintaining the notion that academic writing is an intellectual and professional task, rather than one which involves the whole of the writer's self, leads to difficulty and disenchantment with the writing process The split between academic and creative thinking, writing and identity is a relic of Western Enlightenment thought, which unfortunately persists in the twenty-first century university. (Antoniou and Moriarty 159-60)

In 2023, it is safe to say that we are long overdue for an overhaul of college writing pedagogical practices.

I believe that Mayers' call for CW pedagogues and compositionists to “cast aside institutional stereotypes” and engage in “collaborative work—work that will be very significant to any attempt to refigure English studies and reform the English curriculum” (122) is indeed the direction in which we should be headed. A restructuring of how we teach writing to first and second year students is in order. Why not think creatively to find a way to better reach our students? Why not teach first or second year Business Majors how write business reports, or instruct Chemical Engineering students how to write lab notes from the get-go? Why not teach creative writing in its various iterations to all students or, at the minimum, deploy CW pedagogies in all classes that require students to write?

Revisions

Mayers offers several structural changes that could transform the future of English Studies. These include having a writing department that is independent from the English

department which ideally brings together creative writing and composition (130-31); offering a writing track within the English department (131); and changing the existing English classroom to form “a convergence between composition studies and creative writing” wherein changes would occur within “established institutional boundaries and do not necessarily erase and blur those boundaries” (132). While Mayers offers several “creative” pedagogical practices for composition instructors to employ, such as asking students to find “poetic elements even in the most rigidly structured types of writing” (135), I believe we need to go further than that. I recommend that we follow Mayers’ lead and “include poetry writing or some other form of creative writing” in first-year writing courses (135). Although it might seem impractical at the moment, and perhaps impossible, English departments and their students would benefit from such a structural and systemic overhaul.

I realize that there are many heuristics that would need to be worked out, and quantifiable standards to be set, before many English departments, and the traditional compositionists within them, would be willing and able to open up their classrooms (and themselves) to the practice of teaching creative thinking and writing. However, if we let our students lead us, this process might not be quite as formidable as it might at first seem. As Stegner observes, “the best teaching that goes on in a college writing class is done by members of the class, upon one another. But it is not automatic, and the teacher is not unimportant. His job is to manage the environment, which may be as hard a job as for God to manage the climate” (11). We are not the Creator, nor should we try to be. But we certainly can give prioritizing creative thinking and writing in the college classroom our best shot. Can’t we?

Notes

¹ <http://ugs.usf.edu/catalog/>

² www.birmingham.ac.uk/undergraduate/courses/english/english.aspx#CourseDetailsTab

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