

From The Subject is Writing, 2012 Ed.
Wendy Bishop, Editor. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/
Cook Publishers, 1995.

19

When All Writing Is Creative and Student Writing Is Literature

Wendy Bishop

Wendy Bishop works with writers and writing teachers at Florida State University. She arrived in Tallahassee after some years living and teaching in Alaska, Arizona, Nigeria, and California. She writes about the connection between composition and creative writing; she writes poems, stories, and essays. And she enjoys seeing her children—Morgan and Tait—grow into writing and reading. They take particular pleasure when her books include their names, which they always do.

Here are journal excerpts from two writing students:

June

If we are to accept the definition of a writer as one who writes, we must accept the fact that writers are not a special type of person. Those who write might be of any age, shape, background or interest. They may produce a technical manual or a provocative essay or a piece of artistic prose. The one thing they hold in common is the use of language.

If I write a letter to my friend, I am a writer. If I submit a term paper of the same caliber of technique to a committee judging a dissertation, they might dispute whether or not I am a writer! Perhaps writing, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

When All Writing is Creative and Student Writing Is Literature

193

On the other hand, I can consider myself a writer if no one beholds that I write. Emily Dickinson certainly was a writer during her lifetime, not just after the discovery of her wealth of poetry. The first grader who tells in scrawled words and pictures of the arrival of a baby sister should be encouraged to call herself and be called the writer of that piece.

Perhaps by widening the definition of writer and dissolving the aura of specialness as a prerequisite, we might better encourage possible writing artists to give it a try. Ah-ha! Now there is another category—the writing artist. All writers won't enter that category, due to lack of talent, or dedication, or luck or some mysterious something that can't be pinned down. But with a recognition of a larger pool of writers as those who write, we are more likely to find among us those who write well.

Chris

The suggestions about how "art" writing may be similar or different from regular writing particularly intrigues me. After spending this school semester learning about composing as a process, I am more apt to see similarities between "art" and regular writing. Similarities exist in the process itself. The stages are the same whether you are writing a sonnet or an essay, pre-writing, writing, and revision. It happens over and over no matter what the outlet. The stages may vary slightly but by and large they remain similar. By learning about the composing process a writer can become more fluent in the language of writing.

In journal entries like these, collected for several years, my writing students often voice strong ideas about what constitutes good and bad writing. Many feel, or have learned to feel, that a writer either has *it* or hasn't got *it*. Sometimes, students enter my composition classroom remarking on differences between essay writing and "literary writing." Sometimes, they don't see differences, easily calling their essays "stories" and their stories "essays." Equally, many student writers are confused about the distinctions between types of writing classes they may enroll in—creative writing or composition. Is a composition class a place where they won't be allowed to be "creative"? Or a place where they just can't write poetry and fiction? And, when they move from composition to creative writing, will they be asked to put away all their compositional skills and never again write essays?

Fran

Is creative writing stuff that is done for fun, and composition stuff that the teacher makes you do? That's what it meant in elementary school, and later. Composition was writing about a specific topic, picked out by the teacher and had to be a certain length and certain form. Creative writing was anything you felt like putting down on paper.

As someone who teaches both kinds of classes and does both kinds of writing, I know that in the past composition was often taught as a skills class. Students were asked to write in particular essay forms (narration, description, exposition, argumentation) and to bring in a finished essay each week for grading. Such classes are now labeled current-traditional. Being product-oriented, those classes resulted in formulaic writing and rarely offered students glimpses into the messy, generative, exciting process of writing. Creative writing classes, too, for many years were taught in predictable ways: master poets or fiction writers asked students to share and critique a story or poem each week (again, almost always this writing represented a “finished” product). Workshops were stimulating in that twenty or more writers examined a single work. They were also frightening since a traditional creative writing workshop could feel like a performance, making new writers eager to conform to what they assumed were the expectations of their teachers or the models of “excellent” literature found in their particular class anthology.

But I don’t believe either of those teaching approaches serves the writer in you very well, and my teaching strategies for both classrooms have become increasingly similar and more process-oriented. I aim to let writers see how writing is put together and to explore the necessary risks of sharing multiple drafts. I think a well taught composition or creative writing class should allow you to explore writing beliefs, writing types (genres) and their attributes, and your own writing process. You will be successful to the degree that you become invested in your work. And you need to be willing to experiment and to study your own progress.

I realize not everyone feels this way, and I believe I know why. In some classrooms, teachers encourage writing students to believe that literature consists only of famous (old) examples of poetry, fiction, and drama.

Robbie

Student ‘lit’ is not old enough. Student writing can be literature, if it’s published and recognized, and read by a lot of people. If it’s just in the classroom, then it’s a bill and not a law. Literature is Shakespeare, Chaucer, Coleridge, Shelly, Joyce.

But in other classrooms, teachers broaden the definition of literature to include more than texts in the traditional categories of poetry, fiction, and drama; they include nonfiction and the writings of many modern experimental writers. Students then learn to broaden their definitions, too.

David

Literature, to me, is just about anything that has been published. There are, of course, different levels of literature ranging from journals to novels, comics to compilations.

And in still other writing classrooms, teachers expand categories to include student writing as literature, encouraging writers to consider how their work functions in a universe of texts and text categories.

Karen

Student writing can be literature—it just may not necessarily be ‘good’ literature.

Sean

There’s not a reason why a student can’t do it [write literature]. In fact, judging from what I’ve read of the students here over the last couple of semesters, they are pumping out literature.

If, during the course of your college career, you encounter two or even three writing teachers who make you feel strongly but differently about these issues, you may reasonably be confused. This essay won’t resolve your confusion, but it will begin to talk about these points by letting you hear some student writers, and teachers who are writers, voicing their opinions.

Risk Taking, Creativity, Engagement

Creativity involves risk taking. It’s likely that in your writing past, you were not praised for taking risks. Rather, you were told that you had to follow the conventions for the type of writing focused on in that class, writing an academic essay, a short story, or a research report. You were rarely asked to “publish” several drafts of your creative writing in workshop; instead, you were asked to produce a polished research paper and a finished story.

When writing classes don’t highlight risk taking, it’s hard to see the complicated ways authors go about their work. Sometimes it’s difficult to realize that the “finished products” you read in anthologies often went through days, weeks, months, and years of change, alterations, false starts, and even sometimes temporary abandonment. For most of us, risk taking in writing spells disaster and failure rather than excitement and discovery. We haven’t often been graded A on our outrageously playful parodies or our intelligent-but-still-problematic third drafts.

Since you generally write within classrooms and under the direction of teachers who value particular models of excellent writing, it’s no wonder that you want always to present your best, most polished, most finished work to peers and your teachers. In doing this, it’s natural to play it safe, but safe work is often conventional and derivative.

All this is understandable, too, since the penalty for risk taking in the traditional writing class is failure if your work is judged ineffective, unfinished, inept. And no one wants to fail in a writing class. Most of us remember too many past failures. We all have stories of teachers correcting our grammar and marking in red ink across every white and open space in our texts. As we grew up as school writers, there was so much to learn about spelling and sentences

and paragraphs and citation systems that trying and failing in order to find a new, better, more original way of saying something would have sounded like a recipe for academic suicide. Yet without risk and experimentation, most writers remain disengaged with their work.

Fran

Then I wrote a paper that was required, and it turned out to be fun. What??!!? Yes, and it was an English (ugh! don't say it!) term paper. I chose my own topic, so I wouldn't get bored with it. Something *totally* off the wall, so fascinating that its appeal overwhelmed my intense hatred of term papers. It was on parapyschology.

Another writer found that writing expository prose and creative prose was not a matter of inspirational difference: rather, it was a matter of cognitive difference, thinking in somewhat different ways for different purposes.

Juan

I don't find a difference when writing expository prose and when doing "creative writing." To me, it's all essentially writing. To me, they're very similar, just the writing research comes from two different areas: internal source or external source.

For Juan, the creative writer conducts mainly "inner" research while the expository essayist conducts mainly "outer" research to support his text-in-progress.

Writing teacher Stephen Tchudi (1991) also feels that his experience writing in several genres—children's fiction to essays on teaching writing—have shown him fewer differences than similarities: "It's okay to put a little jelly on your bread-and-butter writing. My nonfiction prose style has been greatly aided by my ventures in imaginative writing" (105).

I'm suggesting then that writers need classes that allow them to take risks and experiment with prose, and they need to see similarities between the types of composing they do, adding a little jelly to their bread-and-butter writing (and I might guess that sometimes their jelly writing would benefit if it grew from the solid base of bread-and-butter prose).

Genre, Subgenres, Popular Genres, and Literary Genres

None of these suggestions mean, however, that in writing classes you should stop valuing the work of professional writers or fail to study the forms their writings take. Traditionally, a great deal of student time in English classes has been spent acquiring genre knowledge, examining strategies for making poems seem like poems, stories like stories, and essays like essays. So part of

the writing classroom, too, always involves the study of exemplary or expert writing in the forms you hope to learn. But you also always need the opportunity to write against and experiment with those forms. *You have to try it to do it*, whether bread-and-butter or jelly writing.

All of us can learn to value literary forms just as all of us value nonliterary forms or literary subgenres. My own not-so-hidden secret is that I love the writing of women detective novelists as well as the finest, most famous academic poetry I've ever read (and I've read a lot of both). Within her genre, for my money, Agatha Christie is still tops. Just as within his genre of lyric English verse, Gerard Manley Hopkins produced writing of incredible power.

Further, I've seen that my students have the same ability to perform well in many types of writing—many genres—if they choose and therefore value those forms. Over several years of writing and publishing student work in books about writing, I've come to like the works of Ken Wademan, Pam Miller, and Sean Carswell—who were writing essays, journal entries, in-class writing experiments, nonfiction, and parody—as well as any writing I've ever read. And these writers have strong feelings about their work because they are involved with it; they take risks, but also they take writing seriously.

Sean

I like to think all of my expository prose is creative. I like to think that the only difference is that it's focused on something that bores the hell out of most people. Also, my expository prose generally doesn't have characters, a plot, or foul language. Not that the language in my "creative" writing is foul, just a bit more vulgar.

Everything I write is literature and I'm offended that you'd doubt me. Sure student writing is literature. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote the first half of *This Side of Paradise* while he was at Princeton. I've seen pieces go through the workshops here that are better than any John Updike I've read. Langston Hughes poem "Poem for English B" or something like that was written in college, and that's a great poem. I think Kerouac started his first novel at Columbia. I guess all that literature is taking on a theme worth reading about, writing well, i.e., good images, powerful language, different levels of meaning, none of the shit that's in Danielle Steel. There's no reason why a student can't do it.

You can see from Sean's remarks that widening what we define as creative and literary and viewing student writing as literature doesn't prevent us from categorizing and judging writing; humans understand their world through categories and judgments. I would simply argue that we shouldn't assume that there is only one way to categorize or that those categories should (or could) hold fast for all people, in all cultures, in all historical times.

Current theories of reading and writing suggest that there is no ideal, exemplary "best poem" or "great American novel" out there, waiting to be

written. Rather, once texts are composed, we find them more or less like other texts that we have already sorted by general categories, *and* we do this sorting by community agreement: We do it within the worlds of literary critics, the worlds of English departments, the worlds of writing classrooms, the worlds of independent reading groups, and so on.

Karen

Literature to me can be just about anything. The word "literature" is kind of lofty and snobbish to me. The distinction I'd make is between "good" literature and "bad" literature. I don't have any rules for that—I think for example, that something like an article in the *Enquirer* is bad literature compared to maybe *Moby Dick*—then, again, if an *Enquirer* article was taken from its context and issued as a satire of comedy piece, it might be good (author's intent can be important in *some* instances. . . .)

Karen is grappling with a category system here than says *Moby Dick* is better than an article in the *National Enquirer* just as I for many years felt a bit silly that I enjoyed Agatha Christie (and the subgenre of detective novels) as well as the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins (academic poetry).

Of course, most writers aim for a genre at some point in their drafting process. These days, we know writers can incorporate a lot of what they hope to share, but not all that they wish to share: they are unable to *fix* a text so that each reader will read it in exactly the same way because readers bring themselves, their backgrounds, associations, experience with texts, and so on, to each reading occasion.

Since a text can never be completely fixed, it is open to interpretation. Readers can offer several possible readings of your text without doing the work a disservice, although certainly some readings appear more "sophisticated" or may turn out to be closer to your original intention than others. At the same time, often you fail in your intentions and are unable to incorporate some of the genre characteristics you had hoped to incorporate, leading to a less than successful text.

For instance, your argument may be based on shaky facts, your "serious" story may be sewn together from absurd and unbelievable events, your *free* verse may go "Ta-dum, Ta-dum, Ta-dum" with constrained regularity, or your informal journal may be knotted up with self-consciousness. It takes study and time and practice to turn out a "traditional" piece of work in an accepted form and style (essay or novel or newspaper article) just as it takes study and time and practice to loosen the bounds of accepted conventions to write an exciting, experimental, or exploratory piece.

Equally, readers depend on the conventions they have learned to understand your work, yet they also need to be willing to suspend their judgments in order to understand *each* new work they encounter. A reader has to identify the genre you are attempting as well as decide to what degree *you intended to deviate* from the standards of that genre.

Reading and writing are *both* interpretive acts, then, requiring intricate intellectual negotiations from all parties concerned. And literature, traditionally, has been a set of texts, all having features that a group of readers and writers have agreed upon. This set of texts changes as the community changes, for, over time, agreement about common features of those texts changes. It's always been that way, even though English teachers often prefer their set—called a canon—of texts fixed, and therefore easier to "cover."

But sermons and letters have gone "out" of the set and stories and poems of *certain agreed upon quality* have been put "in." Women and racial, ethnic, and class minorities have often been out but nowadays many are arguing for including them as in. Students have often been out, but they know better, seeing themselves as in. After all, *someone* has to write literature before it can be classified as such.

Charles

Student writing is definitely literature. Literature is not only found in textbooks, it has to start somewhere.

Gordon

Student writing is always literature, however, the quality of that literature is never determined by the writer, but by the readers of that work.

Bill

To me, if a piece of written work is read by even a few people and enjoyed by at least one—then it was worth writing. The amount of popularity a piece gets is not NECESSARILY how good a piece of writing is, but what is most readily accepted at that time. What I'm writing now is not literature, but it could be if I spent a lot of time editing, and rewriting it would probably sound a whole lot different. I think that student literature can be considered literature if the student perfects the piece through revision. Many students dislike this because a lot of work is involved and many papers turned in are not up to literary standards are discouraged.

I believe student writing is literature, too.

I understand that conventional standards for judging writing always affect us.

At the same time, we, in our classroom communities, always affect those standards when we discuss together what we know about and appreciate in the writing we review.

That's how writing and reading work.

I hope you can see how certain questions about texts—When should writers obey or break writing conventions? What is successful work and unsuccessful work? What makes a poem a poem, a story a story, and an essay and essay?—have always interested those who write and study writing. Such

questions are perhaps answered best by the nonanswer of overlapping genre categories; that is, categories don't start and stop but shade into each other. You can learn to write a traditional poem, and you can take risks with that form, exploring prose poems and short fiction along the way. You can learn to write the traditional first-year writing essay, and you can enliven that form by taking risks with your voice and your style as you adopt first person (I), add some unexpected narration, and/or use logic lightly. Sometimes you'll fail, but you'll always find that you learn from exploring conventions, sometimes—often—you learn as much by breaking those conventions.

Literature in the Writing Student

The questions and voices I've shared here suggest that you should approach composition classes and creative writing classes in pretty similar ways. Overall, both types of classrooms need to encourage *and reward* risk taking and experimentation as you learn to conform to and break genre conventions. Mimi Schwartz (1989) writes:

To value self-investment, to avoid premature closure, to see revision and discovery, to go beyond the predictable, to risk experimentation, and above all, to trust your own creative powers are necessary for all good writing, whether it is a freshman theme, a poem, a term paper. . . . Few of us reward risk taking that fails with a better grade than polished but pedestrian texts. We are more product-oriented, judging assignments as independent of one another rather than as part of a collective and ongoing body of work. No wonder that students interpret our message as "Be careful, not creative!" (204)

If you are creative before you are careful, you will be more likely to gain an understanding of the writing process of professionals. This will happen when your workshops focus on drafting (being creative), revision, style experiments, editing (being careful), and use of portfolio evaluation (which allows you to share both experiments and final products). And being part of such a classroom doesn't mean that you won't still have to examine and explore some of these issues for yourself.

Anji

Of course student writing can be literature. If critics consider some of the trash out today to be literature, you better believe that students can write literature too. The ability to write something that is considered literature is not only a God-given talent. Most people can do it if they just make the time and collect their thoughts.

Like Anji, most of us are given to grand pronouncements about the quality of this or that piece of writing, but we need to temper our value judgments with an understanding of genre conventions, how they developed, and how they have gained value in particular communities.

Summer

Literature what is canonized by the unknown people who create anthologies and textbooks, is a formal definition. In an informal definition, literature is a completed piece which has been published or disseminated to an audience, and has been read by a number of persons (which would include everything, even graffiti and advertisements). To narrow the definition, it is not intended for business or propaganda purposes, is received in a "legal" form (NO graffiti, etc.) and is meant to be enjoyed by readers and meets cultural standards of literature (circular argument). Unpublished works can never be literature, no matter how worthy.

You start acquiring this knowledge as you learn about category systems and how texts work in the classroom community; you also learn that it is possible for you to become part of that writing community. These questions you have, the beliefs you hold, the worries you may feel, can all be explored. Remember, risk taking and experimentation results in knowledge, not in anxiety. At the same time, if your writing goal is, ultimately, to become a mystery novelist, you won't be tempted completely to ignore the requirements and limitations of that type of writing. A consummate mystery writer, Agatha Christie (1977) once wrote:

If you were a carpenter, it would be no good making a chair, the seat of which was five feet up from the floor. It wouldn't be what anyone wanted to sit on. It is no good saying that you think the chair looks handsome that way. If you want to write a book, study what sizes books are, and write within the limits of that size. If you want to write a certain type of short story for a certain type of magazine you have to make it the length and it has to be the type of story that is printed in the magazine. If you like to write for yourself only, that is a different matter—you can make it any length, and write it in any way you wish; but then you will probably have to be content with the pleasure alone of having written it. (334–335)

When you view your writing as literature—through a broad definition and understanding of that word—you allow yourself to share a supremely satisfying human activity. For most of us, writing is never easy, but it is made worthwhile when we "publish" in the writing classroom and when we are "read by even a few people and enjoyed by at least one."

Works Cited

- Christie, Agatha (1977). *An Autobiography*. Great Britain: Collins
 Schwartz, Mimi (1989). "Wearing the Shoe on the Other Foot" in Joseph Moxley (Ed.), *Creative Writing in America*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Tchudi, Stephen (1991). "Confession of a Failed Bookmaker" in Mimi Schwartz (Ed.), *Writer's Craft, Teachers Av1*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Sharing Ideas

- Since it's hard to be objective and to maintain distance from my own writing, I'll ask you to play editor here. Make up five questions about this essay and/or relate it to other essays in the book. Then work with other writers to explore these questions.
 - Choose any quote in my essay and write your own informal response to the issues the writer raises. Put yourself in dialogue with the essay and these writers; add to our conversation.
-

20

I Am Not a Writer, I Am a Good Writer

Joe Quatrone

Joe Quatrone was a student at Boise State University when he wrote this end-of-term analysis of his writing.

I am not a writer. I don't do writer-type things. I don't drink coffee. I've never read Kerouak. I don't even know how to spell Kerouak. I don't enjoy lurking in second-hand book stores, pretending I'm waiting desperately for delivery of one of my top-ten favorite writer's long-lost out-of-print fifth editions that will finally complete my vast comprehensive home collection. I don't have an opinion. I prefer ads to articles. I don't know what hyperbole really means. I like pictures. I have no interest in writing the great American novel. I don't "get" Hemingway. I think poetry is bunk. I've got bad grammar. And, I happen to believe a burp *is* an answer.

I am a good writer. I like to write what comes out of my head. I like to write about things that are goofed up in the world (not wrong, nor tragic, nor sad, nor socially unacceptable—just goofed up). I like writing with my pen on a legal pad. I like bad grammar. I like to write like I'm a camera. I like to write like I'm a Mac truck. I like to write like I'm not a writer. I like observing things. I like being a sniper. And, I like a warm, cuddly blanket with a book on a couch on a rainy day although I've never done it.

I think before I started this class, I always had this kind of defensive atti-