

Class Barriers: Creative Writing in Freshman Composition

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Abstract

Despite numerous calls for increased dialogue between the disciplines of composition and creative writing over the past fifteen years, few have interrogated the assumptions underlying that basic binary itself. In this essay, I want to argue that the distinction is fundamentally classist and to offer one practical suggestion for complicating the binary that I have yet to see articulated elsewhere in any thoroughgoing way. A glance at the lion's share of freshman composition textbooks and syllabi will still show this suggestion to be a radical claim: namely, that *teachers of freshman composition, whenever there is ample institutional leeway, should include at least one assignment, if not a whole unit, of creative writing in their courses*. Not only will this benefit students' writing skills in general, but it will also serve to dismantle the century-old bias that partitioned the disciplines off from one another in the first place.

Keywords

creative writing, composition, the fiction assignment, rhetoric, class

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Introduction

Having spent the better part of last summer reading everything I could find on creative writing pedagogy, I was refreshed to come upon Michelle Cross's exhortation in her essay "Bestsellers and Blockbusters: Lore and Popular Culture" to creative writing theorists to start "looking beyond their frequent compare-and-contrasts with literary and composition/rhetoric pedagogies" (2007, p. 74). Among others, Wendy Bishop (1994), Joseph Moxley (1989), and Eve Shelnutt (1989) had spearheaded that line of inquiry back in the early nineties and it has reappeared under various guises since, indeed so much as to effectively dominate discussion in the nascent field of creative writing studies to this day. Most of the discussion has revolved around those areas of composition research that creative writing teachers would putatively do well to take as models for their own sorely undertheorized field, but there has been remarkably little by way of interrogating the assumptions that underlie the basic binary of composition and creative writing, which I take to be classist at root. In this essay, I want to offer a practical suggestion for complicating that binary that I have yet to see articulated elsewhere in any thoroughgoing

way¹, and which a glance at the lion's share of freshman composition textbooks and syllabi will still show to be a radical claim, namely, that teachers of freshman composition, whenever there is ample institutional leeway, should include at least one assignment, if not a whole unit, of creative writing in their courses.

A Practical Injunction

Wendy Bishop's charge back in 1994 had gone like this: "No doubt, students are confused about the relationship between composition studies and creative writing because English studies, as a profession, is confused" (p. 187). Evidently her call to arms went largely unheeded, for as late as 2006, when I began my PhD coursework at the University of Hawai'i focusing on creative writing, I myself was boggled by what I saw as the thoroughly counterintuitive divorce of these two disciplines. I felt out the boundaries soon enough, but in trying to make some historical sense of what I saw as a patently false dichotomy, I turned to Bishop's *Colors of a Different Horse*, where I found D.G. Myers' tentative definition:

. . . creative writing seems to denote a class of composition once simply called fiction . . . As such it is a makeshift, omnibus term for poems, novels, novellas, short stories, and (sometimes) plays; for the invented as opposed to the historical; for the imaginary in contradistinction to the actual; for the concrete and particular as distinguished from the thorny and abstract. In short, for non-fiction . . . (p. 187)

For Bishop, however, Myers' definition, even with all its hedging, was still too sure of itself, and she dismantled the binaries it took as its basis:

The textual creations Myers catalogs as fixed genres will be found by many current compo-

sitionists (and literary theorists) as convenient, contingent, and situated. The historical must be discovered through the ideologically based author; the actual can only be apprehended through the representations of language and constructed texts; and the thorny and abstract may provide valid, but (currently) not sanctioned, ways of learning about the concrete and particular . . . When genres blur, it is necessary to remind ourselves that categories are constructed and that genres are defined. (p. 187)

Indeed, in our post-postmodern age, it goes without saying that any specimen of writing might be productively thought of as a variety of fiction, at least in the etymological sense of being "fashioned" or "formed," language never being so streakless a window as the nineteenth-century realists liked to think it was. Myers' distinction between the imaginary and the actual is perhaps the most specious of all. As Ann Berthoff reminds us over and over again, all writing is in some sense imaginary: "The imagination is the shaping power: perception works by forming—finding forms, creating forms, recognizing forms, interpreting forms" (1981, p. 64). The writer of nonfiction must still engage in the same sort of transfiguration process engaged in by the writer of fiction. Forms emerge from the primordial chaos of the writer's mind and are sorted through, nursed to coherence, tailored to certain rhetorical purposes and fit to what is, by definition, the linear, one-word-at-a-time nature of language. In choosing language to embody mental phenomena, the writer—whether of the play, the news article, or the holy scripture—can at best produce only a version of things, a kind of fiction.

Practically speaking—and I really do want to speak practically here—I am not suggesting that there is no difference between the terms "fiction" and "non-fiction" as they are conventionally employed, only that the genres have more in common than not, and that

1 Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom (1994) and Tim Mayers (2005) have each questioned the possible role of imaginative writing in the first-year program, though none, so far as I can tell, has accorded it much space, let alone sustained a sound argument in its defense.

the delineation is more elusive than it may at first seem, growing blurrier the harder we look. What we're talking about finally is more a distinction in subject matter than in technique. Certainly the personal narrative, which is widely taught in first-year composition courses, bears a closer resemblance to the Chekhovian short story than to the con/pro essay, though even this, I would argue, draws on many of the same faculties. Why then the longstanding bias against fiction in the composition classroom when the personal narrative has become almost *de rigueur*?

The common wisdom among composition teachers, if we go on the evidence of most composition textbooks, is that the writing of fiction does *not* engage the critical faculties in any potentially meaningful way. Judith Harris observes:

Creative writing, in a sublime sense, suffers from its own aesthetic attribute—rendering it “useless” to composition teachers whose goal is to raise students’ class consciousness. Hence, in these redactors’ views, students should be first trained to decipher the tropes and conventions of ‘discourse communities’ and only subsequently be allowed to write creatively. Creative writing pedagogy should have no place in composition practice. (2001, p. 175)

I don't imagine that these “redactors” are consciously sowing the seeds of their own pedagogical undoing when they set out to raise students’ class consciousness, but the great irony here is that the bias they uphold in shunning creative writing as a means of getting there is itself an exercise in classism.

In *The Elephants Teach*, his history of creative writing in the US academy, D.G. Myers traces the origins of the composition/creative writing divide:

It [composition] was formulated at Harvard in the last two decades of the nineteenth century out of the belief that the ideal end of the study of literature is the making of literature . . . Indeed,

the subsequent heterogeneity of composition can largely be explained as the result of successful attacks on it for being too literary—something less elitist (as we would now say) was called for. By that time, however, the demand for literary fluency was already beginning to be satisfied by creative writing. (2006, p. 284)

In case we were hesitant to make the leap from “elitism” to “classism” within the academic context, Bishop did it for us, “The lessons here are obviously political ones; fundamentals precede art and art writing is for the elite (endlessly, the white, literate, at least middle-class kind), and composition writing is for those who need nothing more than basic literacy (although what that is no group has yet been able to agree upon)” (1994, p. 187).

Perhaps in the early twentieth-century university context this dichotomy made more sense than it does today. Maybe it really was only the moneyed elite who found the time to torture sonnets while the less well-to-do had to focus on the more pragmatic concerns of their future careers (though I suspect a little research would show otherwise). But I wonder how many of us are comfortable in the twenty-first century reinforcing these old stereotypes, clinging to genre boundaries that “mark status and buttress privilege and pretension” (Bishop & Ostrom, 1994, p. 6)? Is creative writing still reserved for the elite? Are we comfortable with the idea that our job as teachers is merely to make sure students are properly manufactured for the technocratic workforce? And if we are, then why all this talk of “transforming” students in the literature of composition studies? If our goal is, in fact, along these more humanistic lines, then how can we possibly justify barring creative writing from our composition classrooms?

In discussing some of the ways in which the fiction assignment can be, indeed is, a productive way of spending a couple of weeks in a semester of first-year composition, I have drawn on the WPA Outcomes Statement

for First-Year Composition as a convenient touchstone (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2000). I say “convenient” by way of acknowledging that there is nothing absolute or unproblematic about the outcomes themselves, even if it is beyond my purview to interrogate them here). The statement breaks down into four main teaching areas: Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing; Rhetorical Knowledge; Processes; and Knowledge of Conventions. The fiction assignment, I want to claim, calls upon each one of them.

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing

Michael McClure, at the 1993 Conference on College Composition and Communication, told of a discussion on teaching composition led by a panel of experienced instructors. One of the speakers handed out copies of a short story about a young boy’s hunting trip with his father. While most of the instructors hailed the story, one declared that the best she could give it was a B—since it demonstrated “no critical thinking.” This is the sort of sentiment, so rife in recent decades, that to my mind cooperates in upholding the century-old bias of “partitioning off ‘self-expression’ from a concern with the communication of ideas and proficiency of usage” (Myers, 2006, p. 288). I would like to term this the Self-Expression Fallacy, the notion, not at all unpopular (indeed, as Nancy Kuhl [2005] observes, it has spawned a whole industry, viz. Julie Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way*), that creative writing is by definition a kind of solipsistic, new-agey exploration of self, not as a means of communicating larger truths as it was for the Romantics but as a kind of therapeutic end in itself. This is wonderful, of course, but it has nothing whatever to do with the aims of most college writing programs, and most any accomplished fiction writer would surely bristle at the accusation that his/her writing is more about “self-expression” than “the communication of ideas.” Anyone who has ever seen a short story from inception through several drafts to “completion” need not be told that the amount of critical thinking that goes

into the making of an effective short story is typically formidable. The stakes of this misapprehension aren’t merely philosophical either. “In romanticizing the role of creative expression,” George Kalamaras writes, “the university simultaneously marginalizes the teaching of creative writing and limits its possibilities” (Cain et al., 1999, p. 79).

Here’s what McClure had to say about the “no critical thinking” affair:

I tell this incident because for me that such a comment could be made on the basis of “critical thinking” (a term, like “literacy” and others used to justify institutional practices, kept carefully and purposefully ambiguous by the multiplicity of its uses by different speakers) highlights the need for constant questioning of our assumptions about education practices. Universities, English Departments, and individual classrooms exist to serve particular (if, thankfully, often competing) social, political, and cultural aims, and we need at least to be self-conscious about these aims. I find it disturbing that a committed and otherwise thoughtful composition specialist could so easily dismiss “fiction” as a viable avenue towards thinking critically about issues of importance to students and to writing teachers. (p. 12)

Needless to say, I do too.

An assignment is only as effective as its teacher, of course, and there are any number of ways we might go about incorporating the fiction assignment into the composition classroom—and a correlative number of ways we might go about engaging the critical faculties.

To take just a few examples:

- » Dinty Moore has his students write both a short story and a personal experience essay, then, based on peer reviews, choose one to revise for the final grade of the unit (1992).
- » Eric Melbye, as part of his pedagogy of “serious play,” asks his composition students to compile

a tripartite “casebook,” consisting of 1) an original piece of fiction or poetry, 2) the “author response”—a detailed response to the creative writing of one of the student’s peers, and 3) the “casebook response”—a recursive essay on the creative process and the casebook project itself (2004).

- » Will Hochman, as a way of getting his students “to establish relationships among writers and readers, and to introduce the composition class to an environment of close, textual focusing,” has his students do “paired fiction writing,” in which students are paired with partners and write to the teacher’s prompts, exchanging papers after each segment such that by the end of class each pair has written two working pieces of fiction (2002).
- » Heidi D. Rosenberg assigns her students to rewrite their personal narratives as fiction in order that they “play out any number of possible beginnings or endings, allowing for play not only with the structure of the story, but with the language, as well. In turn, this would allow for them to begin to understand what might be the story that is supposed to happen—that is, what is the grand narrative that they might be measuring their own experience with or against?” (2002, p. 10).

I begin my class with a unit on narrative in which students write both a personal and a fictional narrative. In this way they get a sense of how very tenuous that dividing line is. The culminating assignment of the unit is the “portrait” (adapted from LaRene Despain’s *Writing: A Workshop Approach*) in which they tailor individual scenes, “mini-scenes,” and exposition to the purpose of evoking a particular aspect of a person. I give students the option of writing about a person they have known or an invented person, living or dead, human or otherwise.

I’ve designed my course such that the focus of the assignments moves steadily from personal experience to the more abstract. As such, the next unit, the collage, borrowed in part from Peter Elbow’s *A Community of Writers*, asks students to surround some abstract idea with different pieces of writing. Unlike Elbow, however, I insist that the essay encompass at least five different genres of writing, and very often this includes fiction, poetry, and found poetry as well. I stipulate that 80% of the writing must be original. The other 20% might be cribbed from elsewhere, though it must be properly cited. In my two years of teaching composition, this has tended to be my students’ favorite assignment, and it is typically my favorite to read as well.

Following Wendy Bishop’s model, I use a contract grading system in my composition course (see Bishop, “Contracts, Radical Revision, Portfolios, and the Risks of Writing” in Leahy, 2005, p. 109-120). If a student satisfactorily completes all course work, participates regularly, and maintains good attendance, he/she has an automatic B for the semester. If he/she wants an A, then some extra work is required, including a significant revision of an earlier assignment, a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine, and a 2-3 page short short story (for models we read several stories from Robert Shapard and James Thomas’ anthology *New Sudden Fiction: Short-Short Stories from America and Beyond*).

Some teachers, likely because they’re aware of the institutional ambivalence regarding the place of fiction in first-year composition, take pains to yoke the assignments to a critical agenda. The more explicitly didactic the assignment becomes, however, the less successful it seems likely to be. Jean Grace, for instance, assigns her students to construct a fiction around a reading they’ve done in class (“write a sketch in which characters have a mutually worthwhile conversation about the Perl passage we read the first day of class”). In effect, students are asked to write an old-fashioned allegory about a critical essay they’ve had no say in choosing. While

certainly it can be instructive for students to try their hands at dialogue, I can hardly think of a less organic way of assigning it. No wonder what she ends up with is “a stack of papers that include discussion of a text in the mouths of lifeless characters in no particular setting, with little attention to details of language” (1993, p. 8).

The most effective approaches seem invariably to be the least apologetic, a move that McClure sees as serving a critical function in itself: “By validating fiction in such sites, we are breaking the limits of traditional academic expectations about the kind of work proper to a ‘composition’ setting. That is, we free the speaking subject to explore herself and her own significance in new ways” (1993, p. 6). Though McClure veers awfully close to the Self-Expression Fallacy here (to be sure, I do believe that writing fiction can lead to self-discovery, just as I believe that writing playbills and dictionary entries can), I think his basic point is a good one. By disrupting received notions about what’s proper to the composition setting, we stand to validate our students in new ways, both by modeling the kind of creative, critical thinking we hope for them to engage in, and by giving them fiction as another tool to think with. To be sure, it is partly a political act I am advocating here. The fiction assignment invites students to produce the kinds of literatures that their institutions have for the past century or so deemed them fit only to consume. And while few of our students may go on to be professional writers, all of them stand to benefit from the kinds of critical thinking engendered by a constructivist approach to literature. Aside from heightening students’ sensitivity to the textures and resonances of words themselves—no small achievement in itself—studying literature “from the inside” serves a *de-essentializing* function as well, revealing to students the constructed, provisional nature of all texts, and by extension, of all systems of meaning. So while any critical pedagogy might teach students to ask questions like “What is this?” and “What does it mean?” the constructivist approach encourages students

to augment these with other, more active and dialogic questions like “Why is this the way it is?” and “How might it be made better?”

Rhetorical Knowledge

While the notion of the solitary writer who writes for none but himself/herself may have a certain romantic appeal, I’m not sure such a writer has ever existed. Every writer I know admits to writing to some audience, even if only an imaginary one. Students, in their sometimes capacity as reluctant writers, may in fact *not* want to be read; but if they have to be, they would presumably like it to be with approbation. Wayne Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, writes about the unavoidable rhetorical exigencies of the writer of fiction:

In short, all of the clichés about the natural object being self-sufficient are at best half-truths. Though some characters and events may speak by themselves their artistic message to the reader, and thus carry in a weak form their own rhetoric, none will do so with proper clarity and force until the author brings all his powers to bear on the problem of making the reader see what they really are. The author cannot choose whether to use rhetorical heightening. His only choice is of the kind of rhetoric he will use. (1961, p. 116)

Consciously or not, the writer of fiction, like the writer of arguments, is constantly making rhetorical choices. The more conscious he/she becomes of those choices, the more successful his/her fiction is likely to be, for finally what the writer of fiction strives to do is not only to tell a story, but to register certain tonalities, to effect certain responses, to persuade readers of the relevance, importance, even beauty of what they are reading—at the very least to persuade them that they are not wasting their time. Like a well-crafted argument, an effective fiction anticipates reader responses and plays off of them. That controlling consciousness is of course the author’s, though it rarely manifests itself

fully in a first draft; rather it is the layered product of successive revisions, a scaffolding of choices.

As a result of increasing recognition of creative writing's material, ideological, and political ramifications, many recent creative writing theorists have called for a view of creative writing that foregrounds rhetoricity. In a 1999 issue of *College Composition and Communication* that devoted an entire section to discussion of the nexus between composition and creative writing, George Kalamaras argued for merging the disciplines by grounding creative writing classes in "social-epistemic rhetoric" (p. 80). More recently, Paul Dawson has called for replacing the formalist poetics that dominates the typical workshop with a sociological poetics that would "require a recognition that aesthetic or craft-based decisions of a writer are always the result (consciously or otherwise) of ideological or political choice" (2005, p. 211), and Tim Mayers has called for a pedagogy of creative writing that involves "sustained reflection on the very enterprise of creative writing as it relates to larger social, political, and rhetorical trends" (2005, p. 148). A glance at any of the recent anthologies on creative writing theory and pedagogy will yield further examples.

Processes

Obviously no monolithic method of composition can meet the needs of every writer all of the time, and the many methods espoused by compositionists—pre-writing, peer work, drafts, etc.—all have their analogues in the discourse of creative writing. Indeed, they are not so much similar as identical.

While the workshop on the Iowa model is easily the most pervasive method of instruction in creative writing programs throughout the United States, some teachers have rightly challenged it for its relative indifference to process. Even as I might defend the virtues of the workshop for experienced writers, its essential captiousness clearly disqualifies it as the best approach to take with undergraduates, particularly in the context

of the composition classroom. Eve Shelnutt, in *Creative Writing in America* (1989), outlined an interesting alternative to the workshop that would highlight process by combining the reading of professional essays on the sources of creative writing, mini-workshops on student stories, and student essays on the sources of their stories (p. 151–167), an approach that might easily be adapted to the composition classroom. My own suggestion is that teachers teach the creative assignment just as they would any other composition assignment—for the goal finally is not to carve out a *special* place for creative writing so much as a natural one. In my classes, this usually entails some freewriting, basic lectures on craft (e.g., tense, point of view, sensory detail, dialogue), reading and discussion of published samples as well as samples from some of my former students (with their permission, of course), and finally some form of peer review, though never with more than three or four students to a group.

Knowledge of Conventions

The writing of fiction gives students practice in virtually all of the elements of writing good prose, including, though certainly not limited to, "the study of lists, punctuation, verb tense, sentence length and style, pronouns, detail, and data" (Peary, p. 3); word choice, sentence variety, and paragraphing (Moore, 1992, p. 2). Fiction can also serve as an outlet for students to indulge their more playful inclinations; to use figures; to evoke, characterize, plot; to experiment with transitions, genre, form, rhythm, point-of-view—all skills that can enhance students' expository writing as well. Wallace Stegner speaks to the crossover:

Expository writing has to contain a body of information. But that body of information doesn't have to be blunt or obtuse. It doesn't hurt any writer of expository prose to try his hand at writing a story, because control of place and character and evocation of sensuous impressions and so on are

all things that can be used in expository writing. (Bunge, 1985, p. 122)

Moreover, creative writing has the added boon of frequently being seen by students as more “fun” than the typical composition assignment, and while this is not unproblematic in its own right, it seems clear to me that a student who becomes engaged in a story is far more likely to continually revise, to double-check grammar and spelling, to read the piece aloud into a voice recorder—even, in short, to inhabit their expanding knowledge, than the student made to feel that certain dimensions of his/her imagination are off limits. Not every student gets more engaged in the fiction assignment than the argumentative one, for instance, but many do, and one would be hard-pressed to show why they shouldn’t have the chance.

The Nexus

In contemplating the fractured nature of English studies in the twenty-first century, I keep finding myself thinking back to the first twelve years or so of my education when I used to attend this singularity called the “English class.” In English class, I knew I could be expected to study grammar and vocabulary; to read short stories, poems, essays, novels, plays; and to write some of the same. Maybe those courses were more specialized than I ever knew, but they were always of a piece to me. English class was where we studied writing: all kinds, reading it, producing it. In this age of rampant information and specialization, Katharine Haake may well be right that we “have passed the point where the easy commingling and cross-fertilization of discourses and disciplines inside English studies ... can occur” (2007, p. 25), but it bears repeating that while Bishop and Moxley might have been naïve in thinking the walls could come down any time soon, their premise at least was unassailable. Those walls are historical, contingent, not at all essential. Moreover, they’re made of paper, and a lot of it green. If we really wanted to

knock them down, all we’d have to do is huff and puff a little. ■■

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