

Interchanges

The Invitation to Creativity

Response to Doug Hesse's "The Place of Creative Writing in Composition Studies"

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Editor's Note: Clyde Moneyhun has written a commentary on "The Place of Creative Writing in Composition Studies" by Doug Hesse, which appeared in *College Composition and Communication* 62.1 (September 2010), 31–52. Doug then responds to Clyde's remarks. The full text of the original article is available at the CCC website: www.ncte.org/cccc/ccs.

Many thanks to Doug Hesse for "The Place of Creative Writing in Composition Studies" (CCC 62.1), in which he makes a case for close ties and fruitful conversation between creative writing and composition studies. I appreciate his history of relations between creative writing and composition; his succinct summary of our differing notions of writing, teaching, and research; and his hope for détente between the two fields. I'd like to explore in a bit more depth the value Hesse finds in creative writing's foundational beliefs about texts and their production, and I'd also like to discuss gifts that composition might offer creative writing, our close and competitive sibling, in return.

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Creative writing's "invitation to creativity" (49) asks us to consider that creative texts are "rarely produced as meeting kairotic demands" (48) and are written in response not to a *rhetorical* situation but to what I'll call an *aesthetic* situation. Compositionists have learned to criticize expressivist texts as asocial, self-involved, and self-consciously cut off from the material realities that shape the world. But it is possible to understand, as Hesse does, that creative writing offers different ways from nonfiction compositionist writing to represent, interpret, and even argue about human life: "The aesthetic has a rhetorical force . . . of image and identification, metaphor and symbol, of narrative arc and character as actor and acted upon, of Burkean ratios enacted in possibility rather than constrained by given formations" (48).

In addition, and this is stepping onto a path that parallels and, I hope, complements Hesse's, the aesthetic situation has a tendency to evoke texts that are in themselves deliberate *objects of* reality rather than *comments on* reality. As T. S. Eliot puts it in a 1932 lecture: "*If* poetry is a form of 'communication,' yet that which is to be communicated is the poem itself, and only incidentally the experience and the thought which have gone into it . . . [I]t has a reality which is not simply the reality of what the writer is trying to 'express'" (30). I think this idea—of an aesthetic situation evoking texts that participate in reality (that *are* reality)—applies particularly well to the new media that Hesse points to in his conclusion: visual texts, digital texts, and multimodal texts (45). And all this is perhaps another way of understanding why we should take seriously the productions of "nearly universal authorship" that increasingly define our students' understanding of textuality: blogs, tweets, social-network updates, YouTube postings, and more forms on the way as technology and imagination engender them.

Text as *artifact* (rather than *message*) emerging from an *aesthetic* (rather than a purely *rhetorical*) situation: this theory of text, if composition chose to accept it, would be a fine and valuable gift from creative writing. What might composition have to offer creative writing in return?

Our first gift might seem humble. It's administrative skill: the writing program administrator's toolkit. Unlike most creative writers, most compositionists are trained (some of us in graduate courses on WPA work) to think of our courses as constituting a *program* in need of administering, and we may see a department's creative writing offerings the same way: a catalog of multisection courses staffed heavily if not primarily by contingent labor, presided over by tenure-track faculty occupied mostly with teaching graduate students.

We may wonder why creative writers don't feel our urge to theorize a program pedagogy, create a scaffolded sequence across courses, train teachers, and assess outcomes. When compositionists offer advice in these areas to creative writers, we may be suspected of wanting to co-opt their popular courses and eager students. I hope we mean only to offer our ways of doing things for their use, especially our ways of satisfying college administrators that our programs are coherent, our classes well taught, and our students well prepared. We have been under more pressure for longer than creative writing to produce data justifying our existence (and cost) to college administrators, and we're not entirely negative about assessment. We like assessment that yields good information to inform our curricula, our pedagogy, our teacher training. Many of our methods would be completely accessible and useful to creative writing, including portfolio assessment and outcomes-based assessment.

In addition to the humble gift of writing program administration, I believe we can also offer two other important ideas: reflective, intentional pedagogy and research into the writing process that informs pedagogy.

Though many creative writers are innovative in their teaching, what Hesse calls "the lore of the workshop" (36) still informs most teaching of poetry and fiction writing. The workshop methods I learned as an MFA student thirty years ago were already well established; I used them for years in the fiction writing classes I taught; and they still dominate the experience of most creative writing students. "Workshop" connotes a specific set of practices, usually including distribution of student writing to an entire class; response to student writing by other students during class time; and instructor response apart from class time, usually with written comments. One pillar of the method is silence from the writer whose poem or short story is being discussed.

The pedagogical strengths of the workshop method are what have kept it in place for so long. At the end of a semester, students will have read and responded to dozens of poems or stories, received dozens of responses to their own work, and heard their work discussed seriously and at length. Because they remain silent during discussions, their work must stand on its own, compelling them to focus on what they've actually done, not what they imagine or wish they've done. There is also attention to the aesthetic qualities of texts that is often missing from composition classrooms, literal focus on word choice, rhythm, alliteration, and rhyme, and on how the aesthetics of writing not only conveys a message but is in a real sense the message itself.

The writer's silence is a double-edged sword, however. It can communicate a disregard, even disdain in some classrooms, for the writer's intentions, which

may or may not be well realized in a text. Feedback may ignore or misinterpret the writer's intentions, giving rise to suggestions that can confuse, frustrate, or embarrass the writer. In composition, we have learned to temper our feedback with respect for students' intentions, however murky. Rather than demand silence, we aim to foster dialog with students and help them sharpen their intentions as well as the way intentions are realized on the page, and many pedagogical practices flow from this point of view that we could share with our colleagues for possible use in creative writing classrooms.

Our pedagogy has emerged from decades of research on our teaching, and our research methods are another gift that composition can offer creative writing. For example, creative writers are very interested in professional writers' diaries, letters, memoirs, and interviews, an interest in the writing process that could generate qualitative research in the form of case studies of student poets and fiction writers. Also, creative writers are much better than compositionists about coming together to share their writing experiences in workshops, retreats, and conferences, and the value they find in community could inspire them to do ethnographic research on communities of both professional and student poets and fiction writers. As it has in composition, all such research could encourage more reflective teaching practices in creative writing classrooms.

The Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) has, in fact, called for many of these practices in its excellent online *AWP Director's Handbook*. Some AWP recommendations are aimed at the programmatic cohesion we value in composition: a good creative writing program should have "an overarching set of values, beliefs, and pedagogy that reflect," among other things, "an awareness of the needs of its students"; "a tiered curriculum [that] provides introductory, intermediate, and advanced courses"; and instructors who are "well prepared" and "closely supervised" by the program's director. Other recommendations point to assessment; the director of a good program "facilitates regular internal and external evaluations of the program's effectiveness," practicing what AWP unabashedly calls "diligent quality control." AWP even makes recommendations for good pedagogy that sound suspiciously composition-ish: "Students must be required to revise work" in response to feedback that "convey[s] respect for the intentions of the writer, and comment[s] on the potential of the draft, with specific suggestions for revision."

One of my students, a creative writing major in a tutor-training class, spoke to me about the disconnect she saw between the way her creative writing workshops were taught and the mainstream composition pedagogy I was using. With a foot in both camps, she said she often felt like crying out, "Mommy!

Daddy! Don't fight!" Such students love the feeling, in their creative writing classes, that they are creating art (as opposed to the mostly utilitarian—or "kairotic"—texts they must produce in other classes, including composition). They also appreciate the careful structure of their composition classes, the cohesive philosophy expressed across a program's courses, and the consistent pedagogy used by a program's instructors. For the sake of all our writing students, I hope creative writing and composition find a way to save the marriage.

Works Cited

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Eliot, T. S. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. London: Faber and Faber, 1968, p. 30. Print.

Response to Clyde Moneyhun

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I appreciate Clyde Moneyhun's thoughtful extensions of my essay. Particularly generative is his language for "text as *artifact* (rather than *message*) emerging from an *aesthetic* (rather than a purely *rhetorical*) situation." Now, I recognize—and I'll bet Moneyhun does, too—that folks will protest this binary, rightly complaining that any artifact necessarily *is* a message, with rhetorical import beyond the basic "this artifact exists, and so does its maker." Countless theorists (James Kinneavy comes first to mind) have tried mightily and failed to sort aesthetic or literary discourse from persuasive, referential, expressive, or whatever. Still, even a flawed distinction is heuristic.

Clyde and I are casting for language to signal writing whose impulse and end is not to sway belief or action on matters debated or debatable. *Aesthetic situation* isn't quite the right term, but it carries some of the sense: writing that *makes* (I'd previously offered *seduces*) a readership, not out of topicality or kairos but out of craft. The act of making texts that are "*objects of reality* rather than *comments on reality*" engages writers with the same energies that motivate John Ruskin's romanticized masons in *The Stones of Venice*. Now, I can hear Jim Berlin groaning at this naive and depoliticized aspiration, one that seems to deflect students and teachers from Pressing Matters and to perversely

gird neo-liberalism. But 1) I'm not suggesting that such writing should be predominant in composition, only that it have a place. And 2) given America's present narrow pragmatism, I'd argue that "aesthetic" writing, especially in the experiential and reflective orientations of creative nonfiction, is an act more resistant than complicit.

On another point, Moneyhun and I might somewhat disagree. He suggests that composition studies should offer administrative skills to creative writing programs, which face common issues in staffing, sequencing, and assessing a curriculum. He notes that while creative writing programs may not yet hear the "justify yourself" bell tolling for them, they will. I'm less sure. Of course, no program eludes assessment in the modern university, especially the cash-strapped one, but I suspect creative writing programs, among the campus fine arts, get a different level of scrutiny. Given the state of art in America, that's mostly OK by me. There may be an advantage, then, in abjuring too much bureaucracy, especially if creative writing costs are modest and its professors contribute to the campus commonweal, in general education and elsewhere. (I think blue-collar/feminized comp—choose your identity—is generally suspicious that they don't, which is part of our antipathy.)

In any event, as Moneyhun notes, the faintest whiff of composition co-opting creative writing would be trouble. In a pointed smart critique of my CCC essay at the February 2011 AWP meeting in Washington, D.C., Joe Amato and Kass Fleisher observed, "Faced with this attitude on the part of their peers in composition, then, many creative writers might justifiably demur." Among Amato and Fleisher's concerns were that I seemed to assign roles for "socially responsible educational experience" to composition, not creative writing; I failed to recognize creative writing, too, as frequently alienated academic labor; and, most pointedly, I suggested that creative writing and composition might cohabit the commons of multimodality. I was surprised at the weight they saw me according multimodality, but Moneyhun sees that emphasis, too, so I'm chastened to think more carefully.¹ (I'd mostly considered multimodality as one sign of not-writing-to-a-rhetorical-situation, not its apotheosis; I do think "composing" opens wider spaces.) To circle back to the point, I'm fairly confident that compositionists bearing administrative acumen are hardly taken as gift givers, even if do I agree that "we" have that toolkit. Part of my reticence, I'm sure, percolates from my wariness of composition's current will to administration.

I've space to consider one more of Moneyhun's topics: what composition research traditions might offer creative writing. He aptly notes writers'

interests in writers' accounts, in sharing experiences through conferences and retreats, in the interview, the "craft talk." We all could learn from case studies and ethnographies informed by these sites and traditions. How, for example, do genre and activity systems activated in drafting stories or memoirs relate to those activated in drafting proposals or reports?

Of course, there's precedent for some of this research. For example, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Ron Fortune and his colleagues at Illinois State University, most notably Jan Neuleib and Charles Harris, ran a series of NEH-funded summer seminars. They joined high school teachers and prominent scholars for a month to study composing processes suggested in manuscripts, looking at authors' notes, drafts, and revisions. The seminars had a double focus. On the one hand, they promoted reading that attended to creative processes and conditions. On the other, they explored writers' decisions shaped by a sense of text potential, often informed by readers and editors. The goal was to yield insights useful to student readers and writers. What seems fresh and promising about this approach, even twenty years later, is its resistance to reductively codified precepts. This sort of attention—to what writers do, how, why, and what they make of it—can better bridge current writing islands than can empirical efforts, including those of corpus linguistics and the new digital humanities.

Research might take another direction. Thomas McGurl's insightful *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* articulates how specific creative writing programs shaped American writers and writing. Rather than keening the usual lament that writers workshops ruined writing, McGurl analyzes, even celebrates. Composition scholars might well study how particular programs affect students. What do writers think and do as a result of my program, and how do they resemble students from yours? Bigger and beyond, what's the effect of composition on writing in America? What have we wrought? How do we dispose our graduates toward writing, in practice and attitude? Is at least part of our legacy the richness of writing as an academic, civic, and vocational act, yes, but also as a creative one in every sense of the term? Can students perceive and exploit the relationships between these types, even feel an autotelic tug in each?



Today my computer has two open documents, this reply of course being one of them. The other is a rambling memoir/essay about singing. It's loosely draped around events from a year with the Colorado Symphony Chorus, interlaced with memories of having once played Sky Masterson and having sung

in the third grade church choir, all folded with reflections on Percy MacKaye's 1919 *The Will of Song*. Among other things. This second piece, which has been accreting for months, has no occasion beyond the fun of drafting and mapping shards of dissimilar stuff. I hope it someday suits readers, even if they might simply be family and friends. Fashioning a text to please them and to satisfy myself is admittedly indulgent.

But for me, at least, these two kinds of writing reciprocally challenge and balance, enliven and temper. I'm that most unreliable *N* of one, but this interplay of rhetoric and aesthetic regularly stocks my idea streams. More: playing a range of text types, some of them ostensibly creative, revives the intrigue of writing and my commitment to it. I suggest it may do the same for others, including our students.

Note

1. I'd like to thank Amato and Fleischer for sharing a manuscript based on their presentation.

Works Cited

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