# EXPLORING THE PLACE OF CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAMS IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

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JOHN BELK

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# ABSTRACT

Exploring the Place of Creative Writing Programs in American Universities

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John Belk
Department of English
Texas A&M University

Fellows Advisor: Dr. Valerie Balester, Associate Professor
Department of English

The current system of writing education actually causes many students to become unsure and frustrated with their writing because of ill-designed Freshman Composition classes and poor pedagogy. So how can creative writing be used to improve writing education in English and across disciplines in American universities? To answer this, I look at various sources by both composition scholars and creative writers, as well as journals and departmental histories. I attempt to synthesize composition and creative writing pedagogies to be applied both inside and outside of English classes, improving the general quality of writing students produce. In this research, I found that creative writing techniques can help resolve the frustration and disconnectedness students feel towards writing and improve the writing education provided in universities. In addition, creative writing can be effectively applied in other disciplines by taking advantage of technology and writing centers.

For writers, readers, teachers, and learners.

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# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION[1]

In college, I took a statistics course from a professor quite famous for his work with kernel density estimation. Upon finding out that I planned to pursue a degree in creative writing, he said, "Bah—ridiculous. Isn't all writing creative?" Though more familiar with standard deviations than Strunk and White, his comment touched on an important question: what is creative writing? And how is it different from writing lab reports or critical essays?

In universities today, creative writing is often pushed to the periphery. Many students view it as an "easy A" while many professors dismiss it as a non-scholastic discipline. In many ways, this has helped creative writing develop into the unique field it is by distancing it from the pedagogies, scholarship, and research associated with more scientific disciplines. Creative writers often view themselves as anti-academics or craftsmen, changing the lecture room into a workshop.

But being a part of universities means being a part of academia, like it or not. Creative writers need not compile lists of data or examine standard deviations to be scholars. Writing of any sort requires research, and creative writing is no different. The unique approaches creative writing instructors take in the classroom also reveal a marked connection to academia, offering new methods of teaching that can apply to writing across disciplines.

When I set out to write this, I wanted to examine the place of creative writing in American universities. I quickly discovered what a large task I had agreed to. I begin in

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[1] This thesis follows the style and format of *the Modern Language Association.*

Chapter II by looking at the roots of creative writing in the Greek rhetoric education of the *progymnasmata*. From there I examine the more recent history of creative writing, focusing on its common history with composition in the early 1900s. This gives legitimacy to the argument I make in later chapters for a merger between creative writing and composition.

In Chapter III, I address what I believe to be the central problem of contemporary writing instruction—students' lack of connection to their writing—and how creative writing can help solve it. Expanding on these ideas in Chapter IV, I examine the issues of improvisation and error in writing and how everything hinges on the Freshman Composition class. However, changing how professors and students view error in writing is only a small step toward a writing-centered, undergraduate-focused curriculum modeled on SUNY Albany's fusion-based graduate program in English, which I examine in practical detail in Chapter V. Such a curriculum would not only affect English majors, but the ideas behind it would ripple between disciplines by putting control and ownership of writing back in the hands of the students.

Finally, I look at the practical application of this new curriculum, focusing on the major players like instructors, technology, and writing centers. This curriculum will depend largely on the successful merger of creative writing and composition proposed by Tim Mayers in *(Re)Writing Craft* to form a writing-centered curriculum. In the end, I attempt to show the necessity of this writing-centered curriculum both within English departments and across disciplines, emphasizing the importance of creative writing

programs and pedagogies in revitalizing writing education for a new generation of students.

The creative writing classroom today is in a unique position to transcend the synthetic boundaries between writing—technical writing, scientific writing, geologic writing, writing for leadership, agricultural writing, etc. It is not grammar or rhetoric or Shakespeare or English with a capital E—none of the many things that tense shoulders when average people think of writing. Creative writing provides a service not found anywhere else on a college campus: it teaches students to be comfortable with their words on the page. It teaches ownership of a crafted object, an ownership desperately lacking in Science classrooms and Math classrooms and—dare I say it—English classrooms. Most of all, it teaches involvement—intimate involvement—in the process of writing.

So that is the end—the denouement. Creative writing fits everywhere, in every department of a university. I gave away the big secret early hoping that you, the reader, will stay for the proof. The proof is where it all gets interesting, and we have to walk through it together—you and me. Or is it "you and I?" Or does it really matter? It is my writing, and that is the whole point.

# CHAPTER II: EVOLUTION OF CREATIVE WRITING AND PRESENT PEDAGOGIES

In order to understand the current position of creative writing, we must first look at its history as a discipline. In this chapter, I will not only explore the history of creative writing to draw connections with current issues facing the discipline, but I will look at the intertwined history of creative writing and composition. I will assert that not only did creative writing and composition begin as a single discipline, but they were also closely connected throughout their histories as two separate disciplines. This will support my argument in later chapters that a pedagogical merger between creative writing and composition can help address many of the problems student writers face today.

## The Progymnasmata

Go back. Way back. Most scholars mark the emergence of creative writing as a discipline around the turn of the 19th century, plus or minus twenty years. D. G. Myers calls it "an attempt to reform and redefine the academic study of literature" that took shape in the decades between 1880 to the Second World War (4). Now try separating creative writing from academia. Tim Mayers cites the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who worked in the years before and during World War II, as a formative influence on creative writing as a discipline (65). But what if my statistics professor, in his world of square roots and summations, was right? What if all writing is creative? It is difficult to accept, I know, but writing—all writing—is a process, a craft where the end product is no different from a hand-made chair or stool. Some chairs are straightforward and

purposeful like a formal report; some are comfortable and soft like a John Updike novel; and some, still, are ornate and attractive with very little substance like a long-winded ream of last-minute mumbo-jumbo.

So if all writing is creative, then the first creative writing class would simply be the first writing class, and that does go back a long way indeed—definitely farther than the nineteenth century. *Progymnasmata* literally means "preliminary exercises" and was a fairly standard curriculum designed to prepare students for formal study in rhetoric (Kennedy x). The surviving texts about the *progymnasmata* provide step-by-step exercises (or forms) used to produce eloquent and persuasive rhetoricians. The progymnasmatic forms are seen spattered across the ancients' writings, from Plato's Republic to the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament. In fact, the Pauline Epsitles adhere religiously to the composition of a *thesis*, while Mathew's recounting of Jesus and Satan in the wilderness bears an uncanny resemblance to a *chria*, the thirteenth and third forms respectively.

Use of the *progymnasmata* as an educational tool was so widespread because it worked. And it worked because it drew on pedagogies still seen today in both formal composition classes as well as creative writing workshops. However, universities today, grown from the German model of research and hyperspecialization, have compartmentalized (and departmentalized) these methods to the detriment of progressive writing education. By examining the intents and uses of the *progymnasmata* in the past, the present difficulties of writing instruction become apparent and allow analysis from a historically aware position of how creative writing can help solve these problems.

The primary handbook of progymnasmata I will look at is George Kennedy's translation of *The Exercises of Aelius Theon* because of Theon's unique ideas on pedagogy addressed after the initial list of forms. The seeds of the modern creative writing workshop can be seen in his initial statement that:

> *Anagnosis* (reading aloud)…is the nourishment of style; for we imitate most beautifully when our mind is stamped by beautiful examples. And who would not take pleasure in *akroasis* (hearing a work read aloud), readily taking in what has been created by the toil of others? But just as it is no help to those wanting to paint to look at the works of Apelles and Protogenes and Antiphilus unless they themselves put their hand to painting, so neither the words of older writers nor the multitude of their thoughts nor their purity of language nor harmonious composition nor urbanity of sound nor, in a word, any of the beauties in rhetoric, are useful to those who are going to engage in rhetoric unless each student exercises himself every day in writing (Kennedy 6).

This lengthy excerpt shows Theon's emphasis on reading aloud, a technique necessary to the smooth functioning of modern writing workshops (and a technique, as I suggest in Chapter III, that should be incorporated more often into all writing classrooms). However, this excerpt also reveals a startling emphasis on the central idea of modern creative writing pedagogy: craft.

While the "theory" of craft is addressed in more detail in later chapters, it is interesting to note Theon's early emphasis of the idea. He constantly stresses ownership by arguing that, while listening to masters helps, creating masterworks is wholly the author's responsibility. This idea of ownership and craft can be seen in his exhortation to daily practice, as well as his reference to writing as that which is "created by the toil of others" (Kennedy 6). Words like "creation" and "toil" carry with them a very specific

connotation of craft and artisanship that is very important to creative writing, and by extension, writing in general.

Theon also voices the common creative writing aphorism of "write what you know" when he says, "If on a particular day nothing has been read aloud, it is useful for students to describe what they did in the recent past or what has happened to their friends or to describe some public event, such as a riot, a procession, a spectacle, or political agitation" (Kennedy 69). This mirrors the idea of a "writer's journal," where the students write what they see for the sake of practicing writing. This device is used in some form by many, if not most, creative writing instructors in modern universities.

Above are only a few examples of the early roots of creative writing theory and pedagogy in ancient Greek rhetoric. However, to further examine these ideas, we must skip forward to the late 19th century, when writing education was on the precipice of a great change. After reexamining the pedagogies and ideas of the Greek rhetoricians discussed above, many scholars in the late 1800s and early 1900s began pushing and stretching the fuzzy disciplinary boundaries of English. Out of this turbulence and change emerged the foundations of modern composition, and as I will argue in the rest of this chapter, the foundations of creative writing as well.

**Composition and Creative Writing: Pre-Foerster**

The history of creative writing is inextricably linked with that of modern composition studies. D.G. Myers argues that it emerged as "a means for unifying the two main functions of English departments—the teaching of writing and the teaching of literature" (xiv). The earliest seeds of modern creative writing are commonly agreed to

have come to the forefront in the late 1800s, though creative writing as any discernible field did not emerge until the turn of the century or later. Many of the earliest contributions to creative writing as a discipline were actually made by Harvard composition staff such as Adams Sherman Hill, Barrett Wendell, Le Baron Briggs, and Charles Townsend Copeland (Myers 40). So in order to examine the emergence of creative writing, it is necessary to first examine a truncated history of composition in the $19^{th}$ and $20^{th}$ centuries.

D. G. Myers begins his comprehensive history of creative writing programs in America with a chapter titled "When Philology Was in Flower." He argues that philology (and especially opposition to it) at the end of the $19^{th}$ century marks the beginnings of creative writing as a discipline because it marks the emergence of composition courses and teachers (Myers 16). Myers summarizes nearly ten pages of philological history into the concise definition that philology is "the study of literature in the name of linguistic science" (Myers 25). However, much like English today, philology was not a cut-and-dry field. "Comparative philology" looked at literature as merely "a linguistic phenomenon" and evolved into modern linguistics (Myers 23-24). "Classical philology" focused on creating literary and historical frameworks for understanding works of literature, eventually evolving into modern literary studies (Myers 24). But one thing remained constant no matter what "type" of philology was espoused: research. Myers argues that philology's reliance on systematic research "assisted in the 'Germanization' of higher education in the 1880s," resulting in the peer-

reviewed, publication-driven, production-over-teaching academic environment that critics point to as the failure of higher education today (25).

In his book, *(Re)Writing* Craft, Tim Mayers examines this rigid German system—where research, interpretation, and analysis reign supreme, while graduate students carry their intellectual pursuits into realms of "hyperspecialization" (99). The relationship between the German system and philology is no mere coincidence. It was in opposition to rigidity (specifically that in philology) that the beginnings of creative writing emerged as a discipline—its chief complaint that "an austere and uninspiring literary scholarship, obsessed with the ideal of scientific knowledge, had treated literature as mere material for analysis" (Myers 16). It is also no coincidence that in the coming chapters, a connection between the German system and the marginalization of the Freshman Composition class will become evident.

At the turn of the century, a new field emerged called "composition" that established the "autonomy of college writing and created a demand for courses in writing from a literary and constructivist point of view" (Myers 37). While these two conditions were necessary for the acceptance of creative writing as a discipline, Myers argues that, until the 1920s, creative writing and composition were "one and the same thing" (37). In fact, creative writing only emerged when composition was "redeployed to other than literary ends"—that is to say, when the focus of composition courses shifted specifically to academic writing (Myers 37). However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, composition and creative writing were still very much viewed as a single discipline. Myers contends that in its resistance to philology, this bold new field

of composition "did away with handbooks of usage and therefore with the emphasis upon correctness and then it did away with oral delivery and therefore with the emphasis upon communication" (38). Composition professors such as Barrett Wendell and fellow faculty members at Harvard repeatedly scoffed at "rule-bound dogmatism," making early composition the "liberating" English discipline of its day.

Another point which reveals the shared origins of composition and creative writing is the fact that this Harvard composition staff (including Barrett Wendell) would "occasionally accept poems and stories for credit in their classes" (Myers 40). Myers argues that the importance of this lies not in the accepting of creative writing for credit so much as in the differentiation between "creative writing" (poems and stories) and literary scholarship (41). In this way, composition "cleared the road for creative writing…in showing that literature could be used in the university for some other purpose than scholarly research" (Myers 41).

The debate over "rule-bound dogmatism" would reemerge later with the rise of process theory; however, this time it would be traditional composition that would come under attack by scholars such as Janet Emig[2] who argued it relied on constraints to create a view of teaching that was "dangerously truncated, irresponsible, and anti-humanistic" (Crowley 203). In fact, these observations that writing instruction is too constraining and "dangerously truncated" are the chief complaints I take up in Chapter IV on the Freshman Composition course. While Emig argues the solution lies in process theory, Crowley points out that her association of "expressivist writing" and humanism leads

[2] For more on the connections between Emig and creative writing, see (Mayers 101-102).

directly back to the origins of creative writing (203), as evidenced in the person of Norman Foerster. Crowley herself argues that Foerster's "humanist credentials were impeccable" (136). This is an important connection because Mayers hails Foerster as the architect of the Writers' Workshop at Iowa, though he is careful to point out that Foerster never intended for creative writing to be separated from other activities, such as criticism…" (98). So let us examine more closely this avowed humanist who not only considered Dewey a "contemporary sophist who had rejected 'all permanent values and all tradition'" (Crowley 141), but who created the impetus for modern creative writing programs by allowing "creative" graduate theses (Mayers 98).

**Norman Foerster**

Norman Foerster was a philosophical enigma who, against his own wishes but by his own devices, became the father of modern creative writing. He was a cultural conservative like Lynne Cheney, but an institutional radical like Stephen North (Mayers 100). In fact, his ideas for a School of Letters share many commonalities with North's fusion-based curriculum discussed in Chapter V. Tim Mayers says that he "brought creative writing into the fold of English studies as part of a larger plan (never realized) to make English studies a potent and powerful force not only inside the academy but also outside the academy" (99). Myers echoes this by emphasizing that creative writing at Iowa (where Foerster was head of the School of Letters) was merely "one *part* of a plan, and the larger plan was to take command of literary study for the purpose of revolutionizing it" (124). In fact, Foerster did not want to see writing taught separately from literature at all, as he was "contemptuous of composition instruction conducted

apart from literary study"—including creative writing (Crowley 142). After his resignation from Iowa in 1944, Foerster expected creative writing to be the first portion of his program to go; however, by the sixties he marveled not only that it was thriving, but said that it was "used probably too much today" (Myers 139).

A foundational part of Foerster's humanist philosophy was his staunch opposition to the Germanization of universities mentioned earlier. Crowley points out that Foerster, like his mentor Irving Babbitt, espoused the idea that the adoption of the German model led universities to reject prescribed curricula and embrace the elective system, which led to a "decay of standards" (140). Foerster felt that the new elective system "prompted educators to build curricula around individual needs rather than received tradition" (140). With the rise of Dewey (and still today) this became an increasingly conservative point of view that could place unneeded limits on students' learning potential. However, many of the complaints *against* modern creative writing come from this New Humanist mindset as well (e.g., it is too lax, disregards rules and standards, and separates writing from traditional humanities by emphasizing personal expression). The fact that Foerster's ideas can be seen in the foundation of and opposition to creative writing emphasizes the need for middle ground in writing instruction.

Most importantly, Foerster's idea for his School of Letters at Iowa was the first attempt to unify the disparate strands of "English studies" under the New Humanist philosophy. The goal was to create a "centralized unit…to foster and develop the common areas of literary study" (Myers 126). Foerster cautioned that this program was

not meant to be "a vocational school for authors and critics" (Myers 126), although that is largely what its direct descendent, the Writers' Workshop, has become. The similarities in mission and practice to the fusion-based curriculum discussed in Chapter V are striking, as both seek to unify the "fields" and factions within English departments into a cohesive educational whole. Mayers supports this when he says that "[c]urrent attempts by scholars and teachers to refigure English studies are in many ways an attempt to…move beyond some of the narrow concerns of literary studies without casting them aside completely" (Mayers 101). It is no coincidence that Stephen North's work to do just this with the fusion-based curriculum was published in the *Refiguring the PhD in English Studies* series.

Myers argues that Foerster sought to devise a literary education that was more inclusive (139). Foerster's traditionalist views and cultural conservatism cast doubt on this statement. However, whether Foerster consciously attempted to fling wide the gates of humanities education or whether it was simply a byproduct of his School of Letters, he nonetheless created an opening for a group of scholars who had been largely voiceless in the realm of English: women. Myers argues it was creative writing that put an end to female exclusion from the literary profession by opening the previously shut doors to literary education. The shift from philology to criticism meant a shift from past to present, or as Myers puts it, "from a dead to a living literature" (139). Literature suddenly expanded with contemporary authors being examined in universities—the dead white men of canon were no longer the only writers worth reading. And creative writing slowly offered women a foot in the door—a chance to become these contemporary

authors. Myers is careful, and correct, to point out on several occasions that this change did not happen overnight, nor did it happen without resistance. Nonetheless, what Myers describes as a "remarkable run of books" on how to write was published during the 1930s, and in 1931, the first thesis in creative writing accepted at the University of Iowa was written by woman (140-141), revealing that despite his intent, Foerster's ideas had succeeded in making writing a more inclusive discipline.

**Composition and Creative Writing: Post-Foerster**

Sharon Crowley writes in a chapter on Process Pedagogy that, "The thumbnail history encapsulated in 'teach the process not the product' still animates composition lore" (190). She says this because process theory truly did make the composition classroom "a more interesting place to be" (Crowley 190). With the theory's emergence in the sixties and seventies, scholars like the aforementioned Janet Emig began to treat "process" as a pedagogical messiah—after all, it professionalized the field of composition, reconceptualized students as writers, and made writing "a lot more fun to teach" (Crowley 191). However, as Crowley argues, it was not the "antidote to current-traditional pedagogy" that many claimed it to be (191).

Process theory is based on an attempt to scientifically learn about how humans write through observation and then teach that process. The broad "steps" writing was broken into by early theorists like Flower and Hayes were generalized and not applicable to every person in every situation that involved writing. This breadth can sometimes lead to pedagogy that is either too anomalous or too limiting. The idea that process theory can be limiting is echoed in James Kinneavy's opinion that the "process

movement" has "taken concern with process to an extreme and has lost sight of the product that comes at the 'end' of the process" (qtd. in Mayers 79). For example, Crowley gives credit to Rohman and Wlecke for isolating the stage of composing called "Pre-writing" and defining it as "the stage of discovery in the writing process when a person assimilates his 'subject' to himself" (198). However, Kinneavy feels that even this idea was "entirely too narrow a view of the process of writing," citing the precondition that "all interpretation must begin with the mental structure which the interpreter brings to the object being interpreted" (Mayers 79).

These issues concerning the writing process are discussed in much more detail in Chapter III. Suffice it to say that, despite the fact these weaknesses can sometimes be a danger, the writing process does not *always* lead to narrow or negative pedagogy. Process theory treats writing as a craft that can be learned—a very important distinction to note. In this sense, its foundations are more closely related to creative writing than are many creative writing professors'. While process does not (and cannot) map out the specifics of writing, it is important to the history of creative writing because it dispels the idea that only certain people can write.

Myers points out that, by the 1960s, creative writing programs had become "a machine for creating more creative writing programs" (146). He quotes Allen Tate, who in 1964 warned that "the academically certified Creative Writer goes out to teach Creative Writing, and produces other Creative Writers who are not writers, but who produce still other Creative Writers who are not writers" (Myers 147). So if we are to believe Tate, creative writing in the sixties was "professionalizing" writing into

something other than writing (Myers 147). Meanwhile, process theorists were performing an autopsy, observing to the best of their abilities the inner-workings of writing. In this way, process theorists took a more democratic approach to writing as a teachable and learnable craft with a distinct purpose outside of other writers' approval. However, the limitations of both arise in their answer to the question *What is writing?*

Process theorists tended to focus on "classroom writing"—after all, the purpose of the Freshman Composition class was to prepare students for academic writing in college. Mirroring the creative writing programs of the sixties, Freshman Composition classes soon began to teach students how to successfully write for Freshman Composition (a trend I will examine in more depth in Chapter IV). In this way, both creative writing and composition classes began to teach for new, narrow genres of writing they created and promulgated, a problem still felt in both fields. Myers quotes novelist Walter Van Tilburg Clark to address this problem: "The teaching of writing can have but one purpose, the production of writers. That must be its central purpose, just as surely as the central purpose of teaching law, engineering or medicine, is to produce lawyers, engineers or physicians" (149). The one issue I take with this is that Clark defined a writer as one devoted to "serious poetry and fiction" (Myers 149). My definition of a writer is much broader and simpler: someone who produces writing. In this case, producing writers would simply require imparting the skills and confidence necessary for various types of writing.

When the system compartmentalizes writing into arbitrary categories like creative, scientific, and technical, it leads to the creation of self-contained genres as seen

with creative writing programs in the sixties and Freshman Composition today. If students are taught to write for an arbitrary standard from the start, there is little horizontal mobility between genres. For example, an engineer might grow comfortable writing lab reports but be intimidated by an introductory creative writing class. This is because he has never been taught how to write, only how to write lab reports. The end result of this is what we see today: professors frustrated by the idea that their students "don't know how to write." However, the real problem is that most of these students simply do not know how to write *for the professor*.

An example of this can be seen in Lynn Z. Bloom's statement that graduate students are often little more than "competent ventriloquists in the language of critical jargon" (57). They are not necessarily more successful writers than anyone else; they have simply mastered a particular form of writing which makes them successful in their chosen career. However, like the engineer above, their proficiency with other forms of writing may be lacking, further evidencing the weakness of writing instruction in self-contained "genres." To combat this, Bloom assigns creative writing in her literature class, poetry or drama in her "Women Writers" class, and a 1st person research paper in her Rhetoric class (Bloom 56-57). She argues that this "vast, open universe forces students to look beyond the critical boundaries in which they have been comfortably, sometimes complacently, confined" (57). And by doing so, these students truly do become stronger, more proficient writers able to satisfy the diverse requirements of writing in many fields.

Which brings us back to the intertwined histories of creative writing and composition. It is no coincidence that the two fields have developed in similar fashion, encountering similar problems since they split from each other in the early 1900s. The way each has narrowed into its own self-contained genre is the end result of the Germanization of American universities—Mayers' "hyperspecialization" of graduate students applied to entire departments. But the walls between these "genres" of writing are very real (and very detrimental) to students, forming a wall of frustration that separates them from their writing. Which leads to the real issue: the issue of involvement.

# CHAPTER III: THE ISSUE OF INVOLVEMENT

Author Jim Corder said, "I don't want to be constructed or interpreted. I want to be known and acknowledged. I want not to be invisible" (qtd. in Hoy 103). This quote gets to the heart of the most pressing issue in writing education: the issue of involvement. Both in writing classrooms and other disciplines, lack of involvement is a problem. Even the most formal academic writing is a craft that students can become better at, despite any notions of inborn talent or "voice" (which I will address later in this chapter). Compared before to building a chair, the process of writing can be both restricting and liberating. There are certain rules and standards to follow or meet—certain goals to achieve. Style, grammar, and exceptions to rules are often cited as the largest frustration students have with writing. A student faced with a bevy of Draconian laws for formatting, usage, grammar, style, organization, and punctuation can quickly become disinterested in tedious rules they view as inconsequential. If writing is nothing more than MLA or Chicago (or more often, arbitrary) standards, very few students will *want* to be involved.

Regardless of appearance, this is not an assault on style guides and rules. Dating back to the early ledgers and lists carved on tablets, the purpose of writing is to visualize and organize language so that people can understand it. Rules are important to this. But look at grammar. I tell students that grammar is a paradox: it is at the same time the most and least important part of writing. It is the most important because it is an audience's first impression of an author, like wearing formal business dress to a job interview. It is the least important because (as a favorite creative writing professor once

put it) it is nothing that a bonehead grammar book and a few hours of tedium cannot fix. In order for students to feel involved in the process of writing, they must first be made aware that there is no single process at all. There is no single way to brainstorm, no way to organize, no way to use grammar or rhetorical devices. When students understand this, they begin to ask Why? How? When? What? They become aware of how they write, and more importantly, they become invested in it, developing the ability to change it.

**The Writing Process**

The idea of a single "Writing Process" is limiting in the teaching of writing. It disconnects students from their own abilities for the sake of common pedagogy and "instruction." Worse yet, it can result in students' complete withdrawal from their own writing. Tim Mayers cites rhetorician James Kinneavy's argument that there is no "single process underlying all invention, prewriting, and editing stages" (80). Rosemary Winslow clarifies that process is not an uncomplicated model to be followed or taught easily, and that with the development of postprocess theories, "teachers learned to think and teach with a more complex view of what writing was and could do" (318).

This view of the "Writing Process" is important because it reflects a growing understanding of how people write (i.e., differently). Early process theorists like Macrorie, Elbow, Flower, and Hayes provided unique insights into writing pedagogies, but labored "under the assumption that the writing process begins when the writer sets pencil to paper or fingers to keyboard" (Mayers 79). This does not account for an important idea that Creative Writers hold supreme: voice. I will address the idea of

"voice" and the baggage it brings to writing shortly, but for now, suffice it to say that if voice is anything, it is style that has impact on a reader. However, the quasi-religion that has formed around voice did not develop out of mid-air. It, like process and postprocess theory, is founded in logical observations of how people write, and it is important to students' sense of involvement in their own writing.

Past experience, personality, human interaction, education, and many other things go into a piece of writing. When process theorists like "Flower and Hayes divide up the composing process into three distinct activities: 'planning or goal setting,' 'translating,' and 'reviewing'" (Bartholomae 65), it can add to the idea that writing is something beyond the reach of many students by implying that there is a right way or wrong way to go about it. Students do not feel like writing is about communicating *their* ideas, but about giving the instructor what he/she "wants" or simply "churning something out." Narrowing writing into a series of trinkets, tricks, and doo-dads further separates students from the idea that writing is more than putting words on a page; it is putting *their* words on a page—*their* ideas.

So where does creative writing fit into all of this? First, it releases the limitations of process by presenting a more complex view of writing, much as postprocess theory did in the late 1980s (Winslow 318). Process and Postprocess theories attempt to break down through observation and analysis how we as humans write. They revolve around questions like: what is the purpose of writing? How do we use it? How *can* we use it? And they are founded on an egalitarian belief that writing is a skill that can be taught. But they can succumb to the sin of being limiting in their pedagogy. It is possible for

inexperienced (and sometimes experienced) instructors to treat writing like any other impersonal, learnable skill (a trend startlingly prevalent in many Freshman Composition courses), devaluing—if not wholly dismissing—the human element. Creative writing classrooms reestablish writing as both a personal and public endeavor by teaching ownership, craftsmanship, and purpose.

Creative writing is not (nor should it be) a paper churned out for a faceless professor whose only response is in red pen. It is the carefully chosen, particularly arranged words of a story or poem or lab report addressed to an audience of peers who give immediate response. Researchers publish in peer-reviewed journals, and as a result, put great care into every detail of their writing, whether it be about composition or quantum physics. Peer response is the most important part of writing, but the "writing process" rarely extends beyond a "Revision" stage. At best it might include a stiff "peer-editing" session—a deceiving name because when the red pen is placed in the hands of peers, they almost always cease to be peers and become authorities. However, when writing is truly done for an audience of peers, writers "begin to break out of the commonly internalized sense that the reader of a text always has authority over them" (Elbow 226).

An example of how creative writing avoids this can be seen in one of my own prose creative writing classes. The instructor would randomly select a person to read a portion of his or her story, ranging from a single page to the entire piece. The reader would then witness the response of a captive (or not so captive audience). He/she could see the body language of the listeners as the story was read, allowing the audience to

give more thorough and helpful advice through their natural, involuntary responses than through polished spoken or written comments. This method also divides authority between the group, never allowing any single person to become the faceless, pen-wielding judge that can be so detrimental to writing education. Finally, this method (and creative writing in general) eliminates the "information vacuum" that plagues university classrooms by creating a purpose for writing outside of grades.

**The Information Vacuum**

The lack of audience in college writing is a growing sore spot among composition scholars. Tim Mayers refers to this as "the information vacuum," in which students write papers about nothing directed at nobody (81). Speaking of students, he argues that "[r]evealing their engagement with the world…their language should make them realize the extent to which they can participate and belong" (Mayers 87). This is an area in which the current educational status quo has failed miserably (though this issue is currently a hot topic among writing educators and researchers). Using creative writing to help fill this vacuum not only remedies this failure, but places students in the center of their writing, restoring not only ownership, but drive and pride in the process.

Expanding on Mayers' definition of the "information vacuum" brings us back to a previously discussed idea: voice. As mentioned before, the idea of "voice" carries with it baggage that is dangerous to the effective teaching of writing. Those who hold voice on a pedestal often fall into the "Creative Writer's Trap" of believing that writing is not a learnable skill, but an innate talent. An example of this is seen in the statement

that "…writing ability is fundamentally a matter of individual psychology or selfhood, something certain individuals are born with and others are not" (Mayers 115).

The detrimental result of this common view is seen in writing centers and classrooms across America: "I'm just a bad writer." The problem these students face is not that they do not have a "voice" or that they have not found their "voice," because voice is a construct—a series of style choices a writer makes that are influenced by outside factors like education, past memories, personality, etc. A writer's voice is not immutable. It is not as mysterious as many creative writers would have you believe, and it is certainly not exclusive.

The problem these students face is a disconnect—a wall of frustration between their "voice" and the page. They can not make choices about their writing because they have no audience, they have no reason, and they have no connection. But what makes up this wall, and how can creative writing help tear it down? The foundation goes back to the principle of the "information vacuum." Students are taught to write for no one as nobody. A perfect example is a friend whose instructor for Freshman Composition would automatically fail any student using the first person in a paper. While this undoubtedly eliminated the overuse of weak opinion phrases like "I think" or "I feel," I am not entirely sure it made the papers stronger overall. By inflexibly stressing the concept of the "impartial academic narrator," instructors like this have helped create the information vacuum that plagues writing classrooms. Take into account Pat C. Hoy's argument that "there is no clean, objective way to conduct our work, no way to separate ourselves and our interests from the investigation..." (106). By rigidly trying to do so,

educators separate students from one more sphere of their writing, strengthening the wall of frustration.

Creative writing techniques are ideal for resolving this problem without getting rid of the impartial academic narrator completely. For example, on-the-spot freewriting exercises that force students to develop and write an image or a sound in their minds plunge students headfirst into their writing. Because they are writing what they think or see or hear as it comes to them, there is no wall between their thoughts and the page—they are directly invested in the writing. If we assign a rewrite of this in a different form (e.g., an archeological field report) students will be forced to explore the connection between their words and their audience, as well as the elephant in the writing classroom: that there is more to writing than argumentative essays and critical academic discourse. This opens the door for in-depth discussion of how students write and defend the choices they make. What did they notice about their original freewriting as they shaped it with a different "voice?" What difficulties did they experience? Why did they make the changes they did, and how did those changes make the assignment sound less like stream-of-consciousness and more like a formal, scholarly report? Not only do techniques like this encourage deep thought about what makes a piece of writing effective, but they give students a purpose for writing—a scenario and audience—that alleviates frustration by reconnecting them to the actual craft of writing.

Pat Hoy argues that we, as writers, "tell our stories to others because we want others to be able to claim our stories as their own" (108). This is not only true of novelists, but can be expanded to scientists, scholars, poets, mathematicians, etc.

Humans write because they have something to communicate. But when writing education removes the audience and purpose of the writing, students lose ownership, and more importantly authority, over their writing.

**Ownership and Authority**

Tim Mayers asserts that "[c]reative writing students…are far more likely to think of themselves as writers and enjoy writing" (Mayers 115). My experiences with undergraduates at Texas A&M University suggest that he is right. Creative writing classes are almost always taken voluntarily. At worst, they have a reputation as an "easy A" English course—but more often they are seen as "enjoyable," "laid-back," and "fun" (these quotes being taken from an unscientific straw-pole of peers in one of my creative writing classes). But what is more striking is the sense of investment these students have in their writing. Sitting outside the classroom thirty minutes early, I overheard two of my classmates discussing the challenges of writing their stories from the perspective of the opposite sex. This is authority. These students (both science majors I might add), were sitting outside of an elective thirty minutes early and discussing how the most minute details of their writing translated to their audience. They never once seemed dominated, overwhelmed, or weighed down by the writing. Instead, they seemed in complete control, changing single words and even punctuation marks because presentation of the characters—and the entire story—was important to them.

But how did they develop this investment in their writing? Some would argue that this is only possible with creative stories and poetry because of the imaginative investment in their emotion. This investment does play an important role in how

creative writing fosters ownership and authority, and I will discuss it in full shortly. But I have listened to a lecturer talk on the dispersion patterns of $5^{th}$ century Athenian pottery sherds for three hours, so I know that this phenomenon is not limited to creative writing. Every student will not share that sort of emotional connection to every subject every time they write. But it is possible for students to be invested in the writing itself, and that should be the first step in teaching writing.

Go back a few pages to the idea of the "wall of frustration" between the student and the page. I argued that students could not make choices about their writing because of a lack of audience and purpose. They lose control of their words. But the two students in the example above were certainly making choices about their writing. So how does creative writing help with this? As mentioned earlier, creative writing offers a unique imaginative investment for most people—that is to say, it is often easier for us to feel more connection with a character we have created than a set of data we are analyzing. And this imaginative investment in the *emotion* of writing can be built on to create a more cerebral investment in the *craft* of writing. It is a carrot-and-stick approach: because students care about the emotions they put into a creative piece, they will care more about the crafting of the piece so that these emotions are understood. They will become aware of audience and purpose, which is why the "information vacuum" is so harmful. Finally, they will do what the two students in my creative writing class had done: seize control of their words. And when this sense of ownership exists, it will transfer to all writing. As students gain more authority over their writing, they will become more concerned with "errors," leading to my next point.

Creative writers have a reputation for being notoriously lax when it comes to issues of mechanics such as grammar, spelling, and word usage. In a sense this reputation is deserved. Creative writers do often take a less strenuous approach when it comes to "surface issues," but this does not mean they are less concerned with them. This approach could be seen in one of my prose classes where the instructor did not edit and would rarely point out surface errors unless they were glaring. But he did not accept sub-par manuscripts—that is, they had to be reasonably well-polished, as if they were going to a copyeditor. This approach removes the pressure from students to be perfect, but still encourages well-edited manuscripts because we read each others' stories aloud. More importantly, this approach puts the authority over error in the hands of the students. We were responsible for editing our stories, and we were responsible for the errors. And as Bartholomae so accurately states, having students identify their own errors and patterns encourages them to "practice authority over their writing and responsibility to it" (50).

# CHAPTER IV: ERROR, IMPROVISATION, AND FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

Embracing error as mentioned in the previous chapter requires a great deal of improvisation. However, the resulting control students gain over their writing will improve its quality greatly. In order for this to happen, instructors in English as well as in other departments must broaden their ideas of what makes successful writing. This is especially necessary in Freshman Composition, where the tendency to take a narrow view of writing is most likely to occur due to inexperienced instructors expecting of inexperienced students a high level of proficiency in an extremely specialized form of writing. In this chapter, I examine the need to embrace error in the writing classroom. I look specifically at the problems and advantages that arise in Freshman Composition, and finally, I develop the need for creative writing in such an environment.

**Error and Improvisation in Writing**

Think back to fourth grade. Do you remember Miss Hatley? She was the knuckle-rapping, ruler-toting English teacher with a penchant for punishing mundane grammar errors. She gave us *FANBOYS*, sentence diagrams, and the dreaded *i-before-e-except-after-c* rule. Granted, she is a stereotype—but she is a stereotype who is alive and well (at least partially) in university writing education. There are bits of her lurking in the corridors of English Departments, waiting to pounce from the tips of red ink pens. She scarred many as children, forcing our words into odd syntaxes to avoid ending sentences with prepositions. Many progressive English scholars today would say she is an anachronism, a shadow of a long-past era when we did not know as much as we

thought about writing education. Some argue that in modern universities she only appears in the sciences or as a crotchety emeritus business professor, and that is not the problem of English. After all, English professors would never succumb to the temptation of simply grading the "surface" of a paper—would they?

When I was a senior in high school I took a tour of major universities in Texas. Upon meeting with the head of English at a well-respected private school, I was told that their program was "the strongest in the state" thanks to a "tough-love" philosophy. At the time I simply found it intimidating, but looking back I realize how detrimental their philosophy was. The professor explained that their department had a standing policy designed to improve student writing: comma splices, run-ons, and fragments were forbidden. Referring to these "cardinal sins," she explained that three, in any combination, would result in an automatic "F" on the assignment. Keep in mind, this was not an isolated policy concocted by a grammatically dogmatic professor. It was a standing departmental policy explained to me by the department head herself.

At this point, the question always asked is, "If we can't grade grammar, how will students' writing ever improve?" I am not arguing that instructors should disregard grammar, but it is important to ask, "By what standard are we judging a writer's improvement?" A grammatically flawless paper is not necessarily a "good" paper, nor is it always readable. However, severely flawed grammar can not only come between the writer and the reader, but also the writer and the purpose of the writing. A balance can only be struck by changing the traditional view of error as something to be avoided in writing.

Jon Olson, the Director of the Center for Excellence in Writing at Penn State, said in a lecture at Texas A&M that "errors hold possibilities." Students can learn a great deal from making errors and examining them in a low-stakes environment. This is the principal that writing centers operate on; however, it does not have to be limited to an outside service that many students will never use. By co-opting creative writing techniques like the round-table reading discussed in the previous chapter, students are forced to address and take ownership of their mistakes in a low-stakes setting, while remaining comfortable due to the relative anonymity of the exercise (the paper is no longer a face-to-face discourse with the professor, but an address to a class of non-judgmental peers). Instead of shunning errors, this gives students the opportunity to discuss what the error is, why it happened, and what to do about it.

Most important to this approach is the idea of improvisation in the classroom. I have established in the previous chapters that the great weakness of process theory is the temptation to force writing into a template. However, Anne Trubek points out in her essay "Chickens, Eggs, and the Composition Practicum" that even molding teaching methods to individual students in order to avoid templates is, in itself, a template (164). Instead, it is necessary for a writing instructor "to improvise, to learn by trial, error, educated guesses, and wild surmise not only what a writer has to say, but how one is going to say it" (Bloom 145). By doing so, it becomes possible to establish the low-stakes environment discussed in the previous paragraph.

To "encourage freedom and experimentation," Lynn Bloom requires her literary criticism students to produce one work *of* literature (Bloom 56). As mentioned in

Chapter II, this helps shatter the self-contained genres of writing being taught in universities, but it is also an example of a professor improvising in the classroom. Bloom observes that many students found this type of assignment "startling," "intimidating," or "terrifying" (57). They were unfamiliar with a new type of writing, and as a result, reacted with apprehension because "for so many students, writing is a source of embarrassment…an occasion for failure" (Olson). In order to compensate and achieve the original goal of her assignment (to "encourage freedom and experimentation"), Bloom improvised again. She allowed students to waive the assignment grade (57), creating a low-stakes environment where students could experiment and learn from their errors with an unfamiliar, intimidating form of writing. The success of this approach can be seen in her assertion that only one student has waived the assignment grade (57).

That said, the bulk of writing instruction does not occur in literature classrooms. The importance of embracing error as a learning device, improvising in the classroom, and creating a low-stakes environment to make everything possible must be incorporated into the way Freshman Composition is taught. To do this, we must look at the problems and advantages of the current Freshman Composition course.

**Freshman Composition**

Lynn Bloom argues in her book *Composition Studies as a Creative Art* that Freshman Composition is an "unabashedly middle-class enterprise" (33). She says that it is taught by "middle-class teachers in middle-class institutions to students who are middle-class either in actuality or in aspiration—economic if not cultural" (34). In fact,

the "surface" grading of papers (putting great emphasis on minor errors) discussed in the previous section is an example of Bloom's argument that these middle class standards are often detrimental to writing education. This type of grading is often (though not always) little more than a manifestation of "middle-class teachers punish[ing] lower-class students for not being, well, more middle class" (34). Words like *ain't*, *gotta*, *gonna,* and various contractions are blackballed as "informal." In fact, there is an entire system of archaic grammar rules learned in universities (specifically in Freshman Composition classes) that does little more than separate people by education level.

A working-class parent with only a high school diploma is less likely to know that ending a sentence with a preposition is "wrong." Therefore, his child is more likely to do so, and would subsequently be penalized in most Freshman Composition classrooms. As discussed in the previous section, "surface" grading can frustrate and intimidate students by counting off points for minor mistakes. However, that frustration is even greater for students who do not know that they have made a mistake. In this way, Lynn Bloom is correct in her assessment that many of the flaws in the Freshman Composition class are especially detrimental and stifling to lower-class students, who would otherwise bring a different set of values or problem-solving ideas to the writing assignments.

Donald Davidson recognized these issues as early as 1953, when he published an article titled "Grammar and Rhetoric: The Teacher's Problem." In it, he describes a rebellion against the idea of a standard, grammatically correct English to be taught in institutions of higher learning (Davidson 280). He divides the rebels into two camps: the

liberal or realistic school of grammarians led by Charles Fries, and a school of younger teachers interested in writing as an art (281). Davidson explains that the liberal grammarians viewed the contemporary idea of "correct grammar and usage" as narrow and useless due to the fact that it was only found "between the covers of freshman college…manuals" (281). The younger rebels, on the other hand, brought with them the "viewpoint of the practicing artist and writer" (281), focusing more on craft than rules and grammar. Looking at the history of creative writing and composition in Chapter II, it is safe to argue that these liberal grammarians became modern compositionists, while the younger school founded the early MFA programs of creative writing. In fact, two of the examples Davidson cites as "younger rebels" are Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, both of whom are now widely recognized as canonical authors and great influences in the field of creative writing instruction.

The point of this brief history is to reemphasize that composition and creative writing have a common origin in opposition to the Freshman Composition instruction of the early twentieth century. However, composition is now largely viewed as the sole custodian of the Freshman Composition course. It should come as no surprise that a tenure track position in composition is far easier to find than one in creative writing or literature. This is because of the demand for the often required Freshman Composition course. Davidson points out that the "sheer massiveness" of that demand often forces English departments to treat Freshman Composition as an administrative rather than an educational problem (282), a problem still facing English departments today. And in 1953, Davidson's solution was the same as mine is today: treat writing as a craft. He

argues that in order to gain the respect of our students (especially those in fields outside of English), we must speak of writing as an art (283). In essence, what Davidson is suggesting is what Tim Mayers argues for in *(Re)Writing Craft*: a merger of creative writing and composition.

Because of the two fields' intertwined origins, this type of merger between composition and creative writing hinges on and benefits Freshman Composition. David Bartholomae argues that the CCCC was founded because a growing number of English faculty began to view the Freshman Composition class as "different enough from the other English, or the other Englishes represented in the curriculum, to require a separate professional organization" (301). In effect, the CCCC was founded in order to address two major problems threatening Freshman Composition: the senior literature professor and the growing class sizes mentioned above (Bartholomae 301). Mayers cites this overpopulation of Freshman Composition as a reason for merger between creative writing and composition, and he certainly holds the idea of literary studies as "the rightful center of English studies" with contempt (110). This merger Mayers suggests would not involve the "banishment" of interpretation or literature from English (110). However, it would involve a realignment in "the *reasons why* and the *ways in which* texts are interpreted and literature is studied" (Mayers 110). This would involve reassessing what Mayers calls the "shifting boundaries of English studies" (1).

**Creative Writing and the Boundaries of English Studies**

This week has been stressful. I was admitted to an M.F.A. program for poetry and a Ph.D. program for composition. And I had to make a choice. The M.F.A. would

mean placing my career in the uncertain hands of Harcourt, Penguin, or one of the many other publishers whose slush piles overflow into the streets. The Ph.D. would mean relatively abundant job opportunities (for academia at least), though at most universities I would be limited to teaching only composition classes (a thought which, while exciting, does not fulfill my desire to teach creative writing as well). Traditionally, there has been little in-between in the world of academic English. Only recently have these boundaries between specialized arenas of English begun to blur.

This paper has been heavily influenced by the book *(Re)Writing Craft*, primarily because of its relevance to the topic at hand. However, a quick trip to the author's faculty webpage reveals that Tim Mayers teaches both composition and creative writing classes. He is an example of a growing breed of scholars straddling the worlds of academic composition and creative writing. The increase in creative writing Ph.D. programs is also evidence of the need for, as well as the desire of, creative writers in academia to be versatile in what they can teach. Programs like the fusion-based curriculum discussed in the next chapter show the growing desire to produce both scholarly writers and teachers of writing, and the increased acceptance of creative dissertations for doctoral degrees reveals a broadening view of writing education.

This is in direct opposition to what Peter Elbow calls "the current, dominant, default, unspacious model of writing" (218). He characterizes this limited view of writing with a series of assumptions common "among teachers and scholars":

- Writing is something that teachers make you do.
- In order to write you must already have mastered the alphabet and the conventions of grammar, sentences, and paragraphs.

- It’s difficult to master these foundational skills so well that you don’t make mistakes.
- When you write, you give your words to a teacher, someone who has authority over you and who almost always gives you some kind of evaluative response. Even when teachers are very busy, they usually at least circle a few errors—or give some kind of grade (even if only a check—perhaps with a plus or minus).
- Because it’s so hard to master the foundational skills of writing and because writing is virtually always evaluated, most people experience writing as harder and more dangerous than speaking. Most people feel inadequate and anxious about writing and seldom write unless they have to (Elbow 218).

In the previous chapters, I have addressed all of these concerns in depth and provided ideas on how creative writing can help improve them. These ideas are best implemented by an instructor with a background in composition and creative writing—one who can transcend the artificial boundaries between disciplines. The need for such versatile writing instructors further strengthens the case for a merger between composition and creative writing.

So far, talk of transcending boundaries and mergers has been to produce better teachers. Therefore, it remains focused on graduate education. Mayers speaks on a departmental level in general, while North’s fusion-based curriculum (as we will see in the next chapter) is designed for English graduate programs. However, undergraduates bear the brunt of the problems with such a fragmented and specialized system. Sharon Crowley argues that this specialization has resulted in various notions of writing becoming “highly differentiated” (27). She emphasizes that, before the 1980s, “‘writing’ had been constructed in the academy in the monolithic terms of ‘the academic

essay'" (Crowley 27). Because of this, students' writing often does not meet specialized departmental standards, but because of those departmental standards, their writing does not meet the definition of writing presented in Freshman Composition (a highly specialized standard in its own right). This is why it is not only important for teachers to be able to transcend boundaries, but for students to be able to as well.

And all of this brings us back to the importance of error and improvisation in the classroom. In order for instructors and students alike to transcend the boundaries of writing education there must be a give-and-take of improvisation. Lynn Bloom writes in her book *Composition as a Creative Art* about her experience teaching an advanced Writing Workshop in Creative Nonfiction. She explains how her unique grading system required her to place a "great deal of trust in the students" to finish the assignments, while she had to be "clear about course aims and assignments, consistent in responding (or in training assistants to respond) to student work, and to student self-assessments" (Bloom 222). By doing this, she could improvise with her grading procedures, commenting on papers over the course of the semester and holding individual conferences to review each final portfolio. This made her grading load easier and gave more leeway for students to improve their own writing.

This approach shows how a combination of creative writing and composition ideas, partnered with an element of improvisation, can create a successful learning environment. The type of trust she mentions placing in students is characteristic of creative writing classes (of the five workshop classes I have taken, none have had fast deadlines for work as long as everything was in the final portfolio). However, making

use of consistent responses and clarity of course aims allowed Bloom to avoid the chief complaints with creative writing classes ("the assignments are too open-ended" or "the grading is too subjective"), instead, employing major tenets of composition which helped provide structure to her class. Finally, her lax system of grading was successful because it gave her the freedom to tailor the class to the students. As she explains, the grading system evolved over the course of the semester, after she had been able to determine what level of trust she could place in the students. This is the power of improvisation, and the ability it gives instructors to further blur the boundaries between not only creative writing and composition, but between the many facets of English departments and beyond. This can further be seen in my analysis of the fusion-based curriculum and how it can be applied to not only undergraduate English programs, but writing in other disciplines as well.

# CHAPTER V: THEORY, PRACTICALITY, AND THE FUSION-BASED CURRICULUM

By this point, I hope to have established the need for and reasons behind a writing-centered curriculum based on a strong relationship between creative writing and composition. However, the changes and pedagogies discussed in the previous chapters will not occur simply or spontaneously. The practical application of the ideas presented in this paper is already emerging. In the following chapter, I will examine the graduate English program at SUNY Albany, using it as a template for a balanced, writing-centered undergraduate education in English based around the merger of creative writing and composition. I will make connections between the established institutions of that program with the ideas I have already presented, and I will adapt those institutions to a broader application in both undergraduate English departments and Writing Across the Disciplines programs. Finally, I will look at the other major players whose participation is necessary for such a program to succeed at the undergraduate level.

## The Theoretical Framework

Investment, involvement, authority—these are all words that carry intellectual baggage. I have proposed them throughout this paper as solutions to many of the problems facing student writers because they are the lynchpin of writing education. However, these words conjure up a wide variety of visions among educators. What is investment? How do we instill authority over writing? There is no standard definition; students learn, display, and view these traits differently. Involvement in the writing process to one student may be crafting a quick mental outline, then researching and

citing sources as they write. Another student may prefer to gather all of his or her information, write each citation down on separate index cards, and only then begin thinking about an issue. And to complicate matters, a single student may utilize different approaches on different assignments, depending on his or her confidence level and knowledge of the subject matter. But I would argue that in any case, the student is equally invested and involved in the writing process.

Why bring this up now? It may seem to be rehashing old ground, but it bears repeating because it leads to a much broader point: despite the slack they offer in definition, these terms rely on the absolute principle of a writing-centered learning environment. For an English department to foster student investment in writing, writing must be viewed as more than a chore. It should come as little surprise that students view Freshman Composition as a burden when the English professors (or, as is often the case, graduate students) teaching it often share the same sentiment. Freshman Composition has struggled since its inception to be viewed as more than merely a marginalized service provided by English departments (a common viewpoint due to the Germanization and hyperspecialization mentioned in previous chapters that does not make room for writing as a discipline). This is because English departments rarely revolve around student writing, causing the discipline of writing to be a secondary concern in the minds of both teachers and students.

Shifting the emphasis of English education to writing is one of the stated goals of the fusion-based curriculum at Albany as it "situates the students' work in writing—their work as writers of all kinds—at the center of their educational experience" (North 85).

Not only is this important because of the shift in focus, but because the program takes into account "work as writers of all kinds," disregarding the arbitrary genres of academic writing I discussed in Chapter IV. In other words, the program itself should be careful to create a system that does not further separate "types" of writing into specialized areas, but teaches students how to effectively apply what they know about writing in different areas. However, in the end, the purpose of English departments must be "centered around, and ultimately in the service of the students' writing" (North 85), as seen in the theoretical framework of the fusion-based curriculum.

A focus on writing is the first of three broad tenets in what I call the *theoretical framework* under which an English department should operate. This means, as explained above, that the product of the creative writing/composition merger should be at the center of English studies. The second tenet is that, in addition to being writing-centered in their organization and pedagogy, English departments must encourage interdisciplinary study within the realm of "English studies." It may sound odd to use the term interdisciplinary here, but as I have shown in previous chapters, the divisions and specialties within English are, for all practical purpose, separate disciplines. There are even individual journals for Literary Studies, Composition, Creative Writing, and College English as a whole.

Interdisciplinary studies is not something that comes easily or naturally, especially to large research institutions. This is evidenced by an observation about my own university, Texas A&M. While presenting at a symposium created to recognize ongoing student research, I noticed a special "Interdisciplinary Research" ribbon on one

of the posters. The purpose of this was both to reward students whose research had broad applications and to encourage others to find ways their research connects to multiple fields. However, this desire to foster an interconnected community of scholars often does not translate to English departments. While composition, creative writing, and literary studies all claim to be the most underappreciated, it is the scholars who straddle the boundaries of these fields who truly fall through the cracks.

Tim Mayers says that his proposed merger between composition and creative writing "would not involve the banishment of interpretation from English studies, nor would it involve the banishment of literature" (110). This is echoed in the fusion-based curriculum, where the activities traditionally associated with doctoral education in English, specifically reading and criticism, "are still very much present and still play an important role in the overall curriculum" (North 85). However, by placing the emphasis of a program on writing while maintaining overlap with other, more specialized disciplines such as criticism, linguistics, or journalism, undergraduate English departments can create a theoretical framework for writing education that can be expanded to other departments and disciplines, from the hard sciences to history.

The final (and most important) tenet is that there must be a change in the way individual professors relate to their students. The broad theoretical framework discussed above helps improve the way professors teach writing by forcing them to reconsider their own views. This can take shape as anything, from a pen-wielding grammar stickler embracing error to a literary critic accepting a sonnet in a Shakespeare class. Writing is a fluid discipline, and by constantly pushing professors outside of their pedagogical and

theoretical comfort zones, then their instruction will begin to mirror the dynamic movement of how students learn to write. North voices a working model of this at Albany, saying, "the Albany program is based on a different faculty-student relationship, so that the writing the students do in their courses needs to be conceived of in a different way" (129).

The "different way" North believes writing should be conceived is explained in a "pedagogical imperative" from a 1992 "Proposal for a Ph.D. in English" which he quotes in *Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies*: "Every course, whatever its focus, explores its subject from the perspectives which creative writers, students of rhetoric and composition, and literary critics bring to bear on it" (North 95).

He goes onto explain that:

> It would not be enough to represent these perspectives in separate tracks and then establish distribution requirements that would also allow faculty to "teach the conflicts" among them. That would simply postpone…any sanctioned intradisciplinary inquiry until after coursework and thereby force any earlier efforts outside the curriculum proper, back to the hallways, coffee shops, and TA offices where students have always gathered to make what sense they can of departmental offerings. Worse, it would effectively remove (excuse) the faculty from any extensive participation in such an inquiry…(North 95).

North argues that this lack of faculty participation would hinder the "exploration of interrelatedness, and any consequent refiguring of the discipline" (95). Even though he is examining this in a graduate setting, the same result can currently be seen in undergraduate English students. The English degree at Texas A&M—as I am sure it is at many schools—is currently set up in "separate tracks" with "distribution requirements" like North warns against. The setting is the same, and I would argue that

the results are the same too as this contributes to the disconnect students feel from their writing. However, this is not merely an administrative fix, but a change which must occur at the classroom level.

Before moving on to the practical application of these ideas, let me clarify that this theoretical framework is just that, a framework. It is not a blue print, but a set of general ideas that English departments (or, as we will see later, any program of writing educators) should consider when attempting to improve the quality of writing education. As Tim Mayers says in his concluding remarks, “No easy blueprint is available for the transformation of every course at every institution” (166). However, the above guidelines should inspire debate, discussion, and adaptability, pressing English studies in the right direction.

**The Practical Application**

Guided by a sound theoretical base like the one proposed above, English departments can begin to make changes at the undergraduate level to improve English studies and writing education in general. These changes will require the help of many players on both the inside and outside of English departments. The first two are discussed in the theory section as well because they also play a role in establishing a framework of sound theory before change can occur. The others, however, are equally important to effecting change and facilitating what will undoubtedly be a difficult merger between composition and creative writing.

(1) Administration

As mentioned before, the administration will play the largest role in establishing the theoretical framework (this includes degree plans, mission statements, and internal as well as external departmental programs). For example, at Albany, the English department offers not only an M.A. and Ph.D., but also the more unique D.A., or Doctor of Arts (North 88). North explains that the D.A. examination and dissertation committees "routinely brought together professors from across the various sectors of English studies represented in the department…" and that they "engaged these disparate faculty in sustained intradisciplinary inquiry that was not only motivated by a shared concern for education…but even went so far as to include the person whose education was at issue—the doctoral student—in a substantive way" (88).

This is a concrete example of how departmental administration can effect practical change by offering a unique degree that forces professors out of their comfort zones. Adapting this principle to undergraduate education, the administration can foster change in the system by gently forcing change in the faculty. They do not necessarily have to offer a new degree, but instead could make changes in the current degree plan. The above example also adheres to the theoretical framework established in the previous section. In it, the administration is able to close the gap between segregated "tracks" or disciplines through the dissertation and examination processes. The student (and implicitly, their writing) is involved in a "substantive" way and the faculty are motivated by education, not obligation.

(2) Instructors

Much of the administration's ability to effect practical change is limited by classroom walls. Because of this, instructors must be the primary agents for the successful application of the theoretical framework. Teaching a writing class is daunting: professors have other responsibilities, graduate assistants may feel unprepared or unqualified, and adjuncts often feel underappreciated. As a result, the writing classroom can easily become mired in the personal baggage of the instructor, the apprehension of the students, or any number of issues that unintentionally color the educational experience. An instructor must realize that beneath the planning and syllabus and organization of the class is a desperate need, as mentioned in Chapter IV, for improvisation in order to preserve a profitable teacher-student relationship.

Instructors influence students without saying a word. Tina Kazan's anecdote of her first day teaching is a perfect example of this. In *Dancing Bodies in the Classroom*, she explains how she dressed casually and sat at the seminar table like a student as others filed into the room. However, when they discover that she is the teacher, their attitudes suddenly change. She explains how this realization happened, saying, "Just before class was supposed to begin, I remembered to put my name and course number on the board, as this was one of the handy tips I heard in teacher orientation. Concerned about doing everything just right, I quickly stood up to write on the board. At that moment, my body declared itself that of the teacher" (Kazan 380). Kazan goes on to argue that as the representatives of "institutional power," teachers have far less to lose if they misread a "pedagogical moment" or their students. However, teachers who

acknowledge “the people present and the felt sense of the moment (ranging from awkwardness to passionate discoveries)—benefit from a more complex understanding of their students and their classroom” (381). In the end, what she is arguing for is improvisation in the classroom in order to create and preserve a relationship between instructors and students where learning can more efficiently take place. This is the same argument I present in Chapter IV with regards to error, and the relationship it produces is the reason that instructors are, aside from the students themselves, the most important people in turning the theoretical framework above into a successful writing program.

(3) Writing Centers

Writing centers are important because of the burdens of grading writing-intensive curricula. They are not simply remedial English centers, but, when utilized properly by instructors and students, can help alleviate the insecurity of students and the overwhelmed feeling of instructors that comes from a four hundred page stack of ungraded papers. However, analyzing the ins and outs of writing center effectiveness is another project entirely. I will limit my discussion of writing centers to a few specific ways they can play a major role in both the successful operation of a writing-centered English department and in the expansion of writing education to other departments.

First, a writing center must maintain an efficient working relationship with the English department without being integrated under the “umbrella of English.” As an autonomous unit, a writing center is largely free from departmental politics and pedagogical constraints, able to pursue innovative ideas and approaches to teaching writing. As an added bonus (and with some effort on the part of the writing center staff),

a writing center can distance itself from the stigma of "Englishification" that colors many students' views on writing. While a working relationship with an English department allows a writing center to exert influence over how writing is taught, this distance makes both students and instructors from other disciplines more comfortable with the idea of writing.

Writing centers can play a flagship role in expanding the theoretical framework and writing-intensive education to disciplines outside of English. For example, in addition to (and often overlapping with) their regular consulting staff, the Texas A&M University Writing Center employs a number of Undergraduate Writing Assistants. Requiring extra training, these students are fielded out to various classes or departments in order to help instructors with varying levels of writing-instruction knowledge (and comfort) meet university-wide writing requirements. In a sense, a UWA is a personal writing center tailored to meet the writing needs of a specific class, instructor, or department.

Through programs like this, as well as through more traditional services such as face-to-face or online consultations, writing centers can play a crucial role in expanding North's idea of a fusion-based English graduate program to undergraduates in any discipline. Their ability to bridge departmental gaps could even prove important in arbitrating the merger between creative writing and composition. However, this ability has already proved important countless times as more and more universities establish Writing Across the Disciplines programs.

(4) Writing Across the Disciplines

Writing Across the Disciplines (sometimes known as Writing Across the Curriculum) programs, in conjunction with writing centers, provide another excellent opportunity to eliminate the perception mentioned in previous chapters that writing and writing instruction is the property of English departments. By housing them in writing centers independent from any single department (Waldo 74), these programs can be more successful at gently incorporating the ideas presented in the theoretical framework into what are often resistant or foreign environments. This is due to not only the flexibility and empathy independent writing centers display, but to the broad nature of Writing Across the Disciplines Programs. However, even with the vast adaptability of such programs, a writing-centered curriculum would require the aid of technology in order to be successful outside of English departments, where the luxury of a twenty person writing class is not always an option.

(5) Technology

Technology plays an important role in putting into practice the ideas presented in this work. First, it creates a sense of community among students, the anonymity of the group and the computer screen making it easier for them to vocalize concerns and ideas for study. This also encourages instructors to break from their established lessons and improvise more often (as encouraged earlier in the chapter) in order address the educational needs of the group. It may seem odd that technology like the internet that seemingly depersonalizes a classroom can create a sense of community. This is for a number of reasons that, as with the section on writing centers, are beyond the scope of

this work. However, it is no editing mistake that Part II of *The Online Writing Classroom* is entitled "Focus on Community" (Harrington 127).

Second, technology can ease the burden of grading, especially the number of papers an instructor might encounter in large writing classes outside of English. Part of this is through the sense of community mentioned earlier. This, along with the anonymity of the internet, holds vast potential for improving peer editing sessions. Properly conducted peer editing sessions online encourage students to help each other improve their papers outside of the classroom. This increases their involvement in the writing process, as well as their sense of ownership and authority over their work. Finally, it gives them practical experience with peer review in a low stakes, anonymous setting and makes the instructor's job of grading easier as the quality of the papers improves.

**The Finale**

In the end, the success of all of this depends on the students. All of the major players I discussed above must be student-oriented and dedicated to writing education. All of the theoretical frameworks and fusion-based curriculums in the world can not offset the harm an uncaring professor, program, department, or college can do. Every level of the system, from adjunct to administrator, must be dedicated to the principle that writing is a teachable skill. It is a give-and-take process, with all the major players working together with the students to help them improve their own writing.

Albany is a good example of a program in English studies realigning around the writing-centered curricula formed when creative writing and composition merge. It is

the end result of how creative writing can work in English departments and expand to fit the needs of interdisciplinary writing instruction. By expanding North's fusion-based curriculum to undergraduates and looking at writing outside English, I have shown how creative writing can play an integral part in writing education.

# CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

So now you have seen the proof. Creative writing fits everywhere. Its intertwined history with composition make the two fields ripe for a theoretical and pedagogical merger that would allow for writing-centered curricula not limited to English departments. It teaches ownership, authority, and investment in writing, and has much to offer writing education, as well as much to learn. I have looked at the importance of improvising and embracing error in the writing classroom, and how creative writing can help in this area. I have tried to objectively address some of the dangers of creative writing, such as the elitist perspective of writing ability as an innate and mystical gift. And I have examined how some of the strengths of composition can help address these dangers.

Looking back, I see not only this work, but the entire issue of creative writing in American universities in three distinct elements: the history, the theory, and the application. Change does not happen overnight, but it does not happen at all without something (or someone) forcing the issue. Each of these three elements is important to understanding the current position of creative writing, and each of these three elements gives us insight into where it could go. Whether it be tearing down barriers between disciplines or tearing down barriers between students and their writing, creative writing as a discipline carries with it unique perspectives on writing education. By taking its place with composition at the head of a new, writing-centered curriculum in English and in other disciplines, creative writing can change writing education in American universities for the better.

And this leads back to the original question my Statistics professor brought up: what is creative writing? With creative writers presently on the periphery of academia, it would seem to be little more than an airy exercise in artistry. I hope that this work has shown otherwise. Creative writing is a viable alternative that, when combined with traditional pedagogies, can teach things the average Freshman Composition class can not. But more than that, it is the future of English studies. Graduate programs like the one at Albany have already realigned themselves around a writing-centered degree plan with creative writing and composition at the helm. The growing community of scholars clamoring for change in the arrangement of English studies is evidence that this is not a unique example. Creative writing is important to the teaching of writing, the production of text, and the scholarly discourse surrounding both. Its days on the periphery of English departments and universities as a whole are numbered, as its place in both is constantly being expanded, examined, and solidified.

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# CURRICULUM VITA

Name: John Belk
Email: jbelk@tamu.edu

**Education**

September 2003- May 2007: B.A. in English and History with a specialization in Creative Writing, Texas A&M University

**Awards and Fellowships**

Fall 2006-Present: Undergraduate Research Fellow, Texas A&M University. Thesis title: *Exploring the Place of Creative Writing Programs in American Universities*

-Write a full-length, Masters-quality thesis
-Present my research to both faculty and students from a variety of fields
-Includes a $300 dollar research stipend

Fall 2006: Melbern G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research Grant, $300

January 2006: Guest Reader, MSC Woodson Black Awareness Committee's, "A Night of Jazz," Texas A&M University

Spring 2006: English Department delegate to the Texas A&M University Student Conference on National Affairs

2005: Texas A&M University English Department nominee for Spring Break Educational Exchange in Doha, Qatar

-Nominated because of my experience as an ESL writing consultant
-Only English undergraduate nominee

2005: Texas A&M University English Department nominee for the Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellowship

-Only undergraduate nominee

Spring 2004, Fall 2005: Dean's List, Texas A&M University

Fall 2003-Present: Ed E. & Gladys Hurley Foundation Scholarship Recipient, J.P. Morgan Chase & Co.

Fall 2003-Present: Director's Excellence Scholarship Recipient, Texas A&M University

Fall 2003- Present: President's Endowed Scholarship Recipient, Texas A&M University

Fall 2003, Spring 2005, Spring 2006: Distinguished Student, Texas A&M University

2003-2004: Runner-up, Texas A&M University's Charles Gordone Award for Poetry

**Publications**

March 2005: *Brazos Gumbo*, "This is what I think about."

**Professional Experience**

January 2004-Present: Level III Consultant, Texas A&M University Writing Center

-Work one-on-one with students to improve their writing

-Run classroom workshops on topics such as grammar and the writing process

-Conduct training of new consultants

-Created a section of ESL handouts for the UWC website covering topics such as articles, subject/verb agreement, relative clauses, and participles

September 2004-Present: Undergraduate Writing Assistant, Texas A&M University Writing Center

-Work one-on-one with students to improve their writing

-Work with professors designing curricula, rubrics, and writing assignments

-Comment on students' papers

-Give lectures and hold class discussions on writing-related topics

June 2005-September 2005: Editor and Webmaster for the Texas A&M University Career Center

-Edited handouts, news releases, and website

-Worked with staff to design and compile new website
-Maintained new website and added new features
-Wrote handouts, news releases, and portions of new website

**Certification**

College Reading and Learning Association: Level Three Writing Consultant

**Organizations**

Fall 2006-Present: AIGA, *the professional association for design*

2005-Present: Golden Key National Honor Society

2005-Present: President, Texas A&M University English Language and Literature Society

-Organize, promote, and participate in public readings for authors such as Ernest Gaines, Sandra Cisneros, John O'Leary, and Robert Bly
-Oversee club projects and activities such as open-mic poetry readings and community service
-Deal directly with English faculty and staff

2004-2005: Vice President, Texas A&M University English Language and Literature Society

**Languages**

Reading proficiency in Attic and Koine Greek.
Familiarity with Doric, Ionic, and Homeric Greek.