

## Teaching Creative Writing: Let Your Students Take Ownership

*The author reminds creative writing teachers to seek out creativity themselves.*

A boy with cancer receives an envelope through the mail. The envelope is large and heavy, and when the boy opens it, he finds that it's filled with a short stack of paper. On each piece of paper is a story—a fable, actually. And each one was written just for him.

A pack of kids is led through a park on an early October evening. Their guide takes them along a path between ash and pine trees, stopping every dozen paces in front of a handful of adult volunteers dressed like fairy godmothers, princesses, princes, wolves and pigs. The children laugh and cheer as the volunteers play scripted scenes. The children move on, feet crunching on dry autumn leaves, anxious to happen upon the next event. Volunteers are everywhere, and each of them has a scene prepared to entertain the students.

These moments were brought to you courtesy of UW-Rock County's Introduction to Creative Writing class. My students wrote

the stories for the boy with cancer and they also wrote the scripts for the fairy tale scenes that played out for children at a local park in Janesville, Wisconsin. For each project, I gave the students an opportunity to apply the Liberal Arts mission—namely, a chance to use what they were learning in a way that would benefit their community.

We often forget this important aspect of the bachelor's degree. We've become so obsessed with preparing students for careers that we forget that one of the things that makes a Liberal Arts degree so valuable is its ability to create *better human beings*. Better citizens. People who are capable of learning on their own and applying what they learn to the society in which they participate. It's easy to apply creative writing to just about any major a student chooses—think about how often we tell stories on a daily basis—but it's much more difficult (and rewarding) to use those same creative writing skills in a way that positively benefits a community.

Just as importantly, projects like these give students an opportunity to take ownership of their creation. In the case of the boy with cancer, it had a simple beginning: this particular boy was featured in a local newspaper, and stated that he wanted to receive letters from strangers. To get us all started on the right foot, I provided students with dozens of Aesop's *Fables*. From there, I challenged each to use what we learned in class about the most crucial story elements—plot, character, setting—to turn each fable into a 1-2 page story of their own creation. Multiple drafts and peer reviewing ensued, culminating in a collection of original stories with a single audience member in mind.

For our second project, we were challenged by Janesville's local parks department to write short fairy tale scripts that adult volunteers could act out for children visiting the park. This event is called The Enchanted Forest, and it depends heavily on community involvement. In the case of my Creative Writing class, that involvement meant crafting stories. Students worked in groups and turned a familiar story—Hansel and Gretel, Three Little Pigs, Cinderella—into a short, 3-4 minute scene with the intention of entertaining an audience of young children. Creativity was key, but so was a careful consideration

toward audience. What's appropriate? What will make them laugh? Cheer?

These types of projects are graded and they help reinforce the most important aspects of story, going beyond the familiar—plot, setting, character—and getting them thinking about audience, tone, theme, and space. These projects challenge my students and allow them to take ownership.

The projects never fail to motivate students. The best part? You can find inspiration to craft them everywhere. Look at your own community's upcoming projects and reach out. Maybe a local nursing home would like a play put on. Maybe a local school could use some storytellers. Maybe a local literacy organization needs some fresh reading material for its adult learners. Check your local newspaper. Take a walk through your town with your eyes open. Search for meaningful projects that will allow your Creative Writing students to apply what they're learning and reinforce the Liberal Arts mission.

The sky's the limit. You just need to be creative.

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