

## **The Text Is in the Context: Calling for a Social Turn in Creative Writing Pedagogy**

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*Abstract:* Brown argues that creative writing can be taught when those teachers possess evidence-based knowledge about what works in the writing classroom. In particular, creative writing could learn from the “social turn” in composition, the recognition that writers are influenced by their communities and therefore students must learn to write with a community in mind.

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There is a pervasive and damaging myth that teaching creative writing in the academy is all a matter of assigning the canon, encouraging students to write, and, if one is so lucky as to live near one of the major hubs of the publishing industry, tell students to attend the right literary events. Unfortunately, this myth leaves undergraduate creative writers without the tools to actually improve their writing. As a result, many undergraduate writers never quite transcend the stage of writing overwrought prose for an audience of their peers despite their goals to publish their work. The truth is that being an excellent writer does not automatically translate into being an excellent teacher. Teaching writing, as it turns out, is extremely complicated. The right pedagogical interventions are needed in order to help student creative writers improve their craft.

However, the good news is that teaching, like writing, can be taught. More importantly, there is a vast and growing body of knowledge, backed by research, on how to effectively teach writing. The problem is that much of that body of knowledge lies in creative writing’s sister field of composition and rhetoric, which has long outgrown its roots as a field concerned primarily with the teaching of first-year writing as a matter of service to the larger university and has instead staked its territory as a proper discipline concerned with the study and practice of writing in a variety of contexts. In fact, composition and rhetoric’s long entanglement with the first-year writing course is the very source of the

field's resources for writing teachers. More recently, larger, cross-institutional studies like those written by Eodice, Geller, and Lerner (2016) and Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) continue to expand our evidence-based understanding of what works in the writing classroom.

At the same time, a new attention to theory and pedagogy in creative writing is beginning to coalesce under the designation of "creative writing studies." Journals such as *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* and the *Journal of Creative Writing Studies* have provided venues for the development and debate of critical work in creative writing theory and pedagogy. Out of this work has come recognition that composition and rhetoric and creative writing studies share common ground. Aside from the troublesome distinction of what constitutes "creative" as opposed to "uncreative" writing (a debate for another time), both fields seek to understand how texts are composed and to help students acquire that understanding. Indeed, as recently as the September 2015 issue of *College Composition and Communication*, Sullivan revisited Hesse's earlier work in the journal, noting that "Ultimately, Hesse is interested in establishing a richer, more varied sense of *writing* for students in writing classes" (p. 18). In Sullivan's vision, the institutional barriers between creative writing and composition begin to erode.

The idea of an alliance between creative writing and composition and rhetoric is not necessarily new. Owing much to Bishop's work on writing pedagogy and process, it has been perhaps most eloquently and persuasively presented in Mayers' (2005) extraordinary book *(Re)Writing Craft*, which argues that "Composition and creative writing together may become 'writing studies,' a hybridized field of inquiry that bears traces of its origins but also exhibits significant differences from its predecessors" (p. 114). Such a field would be concerned primarily with the study of the production of texts. Indeed, writing studies as a name as well as a field has already begun to emerge.

My main purpose, however, is not to rearticulate the argument for an alliance between composition and creative writing. Rather, I offer myself up as an example of what the embodiment of such an alliance might look like. In my current position, I am dually appointed in both the Writing Program--the traditional home of composition and rhetoric, or, on our campus, Writing Studies--and the College of Creative Studies, which offers an interdisciplinary major in Writing & Literature focusing on creative writing, literary study, and writing studies. While I hold a MFA in Creative Writing as my highest degree, the bulk of my professional experience has been in composition and rhetoric, including dedication to professional development in writing pedagogy. As a result, I have developed my own writing pedagogy while straddling these two fields and have benefited from working closely with both compositionists and creative writers.

If indeed we wish to actually teach creative writing, the most important concept that I have learned from composition is not a new one; it is the importance of context. In the 1980s, composition went through what is known as the “social turn.” Harris (1989) offers a clear, concise summary of the movement:

We write not as isolated individuals, but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say. Our aims and intentions in writing are thus not merely personal, idiosyncratic, but reflective of the communities to which we belong. (p. 12)

The social turn transformed the question of “what is good writing” into the question of “does this writing speak to its community?” The social turn changed the terms of the questions posed in the writing classroom as well. Writing teachers had to now ask: In which communities should my students write? What forms or genres are recognized or valued in those communities? What linguistic practices does that community value?

The creative writing workshop, perhaps with its roots stuck in the New Criticism that placed ultimate authority in the text itself, has too long neglected such questions of context. Students in creative writing courses often love reading and writing but have been exposed only to either the canonical texts taught in their high schools or to popular

Young Adult novels like *Harry Potter* or *The Hunger Games*. In other words, these students enter our creative writing classrooms with little conception of what the contemporary literary community looks like, let alone what genres and linguistic practices that community values.

In order to address this lack of awareness, the goals of a creative writing course should be not only to produce text, but also to impart knowledge to students about what creative writing is today. That is, creative writing teachers must help student writers construct the context for their work. First, students should read the work of contemporary writers in a range of genres. Many students I encounter in my creative writing classes want to write novels but have no idea that there are many different kinds of novels (historical, speculative, experimental, even graphic). Most have never considered writing short stories despite the fact that many novelists do indeed publish in both forms. They should also have a sense of where and how creative writers publish their work. This could include more traditional routes through “gatekeepers” such as literary magazines, consumer magazines, and publishing houses, but may also include instruction on how students might self-publish on their own blogs or websites. They should also know how to write cover letters and how to correspond with editors. Advanced creative writing students should receive instruction in writing book proposals and know where to find other creative writers by being introduced to the range of conferences, residencies, and festivals available in their area. Finally, they should know the kinds of questions and issues raised by the creative writing community. For instance, many of the students I encounter in my own creative writing classrooms are young women who might benefit from knowing about the VIDA Count, which tallies the number of publications by women in an effort to address gender inequalities in the publishing world.

That is not to say that the production of good writing shouldn't matter. However, defining “good” writing in a creative writing course is not easy. After all, what is good depends, in large part, on how writers define their goals, audiences, and, of course, genres, none of which can be done effectively without first understanding the context for creative writing. This dynamic version of the writing workshop is not so different from

what Salesses (2015) argues for in his series of blog posts “Pure Craft’ Is a Lie.” In the second part of the series, he problematizes the teaching of “pure” craft as a means of reinforcing cultural norms in ways particularly harmful to writers of color. In other words, a creative writing classroom that lacks context will run the danger of making too many assumptions about who the students are writing for and even what they are writing. Creative writing classes must make space for student writers to define their own audiences and genres. It follows then that our assessments of that student writing must also honor their own intended purposes, genres, and audiences.

I would like to illustrate what teaching a creative writing workshop with an emphasis on context might look like by drawing on the example of a Fiction Workshop I taught in Winter 2016. The class included 15 undergraduates from a variety of majors, most hailing from English, Comparative Literature, and Writing & Literature, but also including one psychology and one pharmacy student. They also ranged in level from first semester up to seniors in their final year.

In addition to the peer and instructor critique of student work typical of a creative writing workshop, this class focused on introducing students to at least part of the community of creative writers working in America today. One of the ways I hoped to accomplish this was by asking them to read contemporary works. Often, workshops rely too heavily on reading canonical texts or more traditional anthologies that often favor historical works over those produced today. While I do not have any qualms with reading such works as a part of an undergraduate education in writing or literary study, I do not believe that reading past works is sufficient to learning to write successful contemporary fiction or poetry. Students in my Fiction Workshop read *Best American Short Stories 2015* during the first four weeks of the course. This collection was a revelation for many of my students. I was even surprised that many confessed that they had never even thought about short stories as a potential genre because they so heavily identified literary writing with the novel. The importance of this context was, of course, that it helped them understand the world that they were entering and what kinds of stories are considered “best” (at least by this particular collection’s editors) in that world.

Building on that new understanding of contemporary creative writing, I wanted them to think more about the genre of the short story. During weeks 5-7 we turned our focus toward contemporary literary magazines while continuing to conduct writing workshops. I asked the class to research literary magazines on the Duotrope and tCouncil of Literary Magazines and Presses databases and to give a presentation on one that they found particularly interesting. In their presentations, the students shared their overall impressions of the magazine, the submission guidelines, and summaries of some of the contents of the most recent issue. By looking at submission guidelines, they could better understand what defines a short story, such as the word count, appropriate forms and themes, and the flexibility of genre boundaries.

Lastly, I wanted them to think more about the audience for their writing. The last three weeks of the course were devoted to revising a short story that they had received feedback on in the workshop portions of the class. However, rather than taking the new critical approach of revising without a sense of the context for that piece of writing, I asked them to revise with a particular literary magazine in mind. They might choose to pitch their story to the one they presented on or to choose a publication that they learned about from their peers. In any case, this final exercise required them to think more about audience and how their work might be crafted for a particular set of readers. Many chose of their own volition to submit their work to the publications they studied. One found a home for her work in an on-campus literary magazine for and by undergraduate students, two others won campus awards for their fiction, and one writer even placed her work in the prestigious international journal *Mid-American Review*. Importantly, all of these students were successful in meeting their goals, finding their audience, and working within the contexts for creative writing that they had explored in our class.

Overall, the workshop was a success. Not only did students report on their increased understanding of craft concerns such as plot and character development, but they often spoke to their increased understanding of what it means to be a creative writer. Rather than imagining writers as historical figures or students isolated in a classroom, they had a new sense of the community of writers to which they aspired.

Thus, creative writing can be taught, but it must start by teaching the teachers. There are several clear opportunities for doing so. First, experts in creative writing pedagogy need to continue to develop a body of literature on the teaching of creative writing through journals such as *Creative Writing Studies* and *New Writing*, collections such as Peary and Hunley's (2015) *Creative Writing Pedagogy for the Twenty-First Century* or Ritter and Vanderslice's (2007) *Can It Really Be Taught? Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy*, and this very special issue of *Wisconsin English Journal*. Next, creative writing instructors need to foster their own community through conferences and meetings. The new Creative Writing Studies Conference is certainly a start, but that also means persuading existing institutions like the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) to take pedagogy more seriously. A quick scan of the 2017 AWP Conference schedule revealed that only approximately 8% of the events were specifically flagged as pedagogy related. Certainly, many creative writing instructors all over the country do what I am doing, but we need to continue the work that has started in documenting and building our body of knowledge about what works in creative writing pedagogy.

Most of all, creative writing must complete its own social turn, helping students understand what it means to work in a community of writers.

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