

Toward a Unified Front: Fostering Collaboration between Secondary and Postsecondary Creative Writing Teachers

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Abstract: Drew advocates for increased collaboration between creative writing teachers at the secondary and postsecondary levels.

In a recent *Journal of Creative Writing Studies* article, I argued for the necessity of re-examining the Common Core standards used in many secondary English/Language Arts (ELA) classrooms through the lens of current creative writing pedagogy. I contended that, while perceptions linger that ELA standards exclude creative writing in favor of composition and literary analysis, a close reading of the standards reveals that the majority can be successfully addressed through instruction and activities adapted from or inspired by creative writing pedagogy. Furthermore, teachers who integrate creative writing into the full range of classroom activities offer students ways of learning simply not available through other types of writing assignments. At the end of the article, I posed several rhetorical questions aimed at spurring further consideration of possible links between secondary and postsecondary creative writing instruction. One of those questions was how teachers at the secondary and postsecondary levels might engage each other more directly, with the end goal of making creative writing instruction at all levels more transparent and collaborative (Drew, 2015, p. 22).

Having taught creative writing to students from seventh grade to graduate school, I am convinced that supporting each other and pooling our pedagogical resources are important opportunities to demonstrate the practical value of the work we do. While creative writing is often utilized differently in middle/high schools than in postsecondary classrooms (for example, creative writing is often taught in universities as a standalone course, while the multidisciplinary nature of secondary ELA classrooms often requires it be integrated into other materials and units), recent scholarship has pushed postsecondary creative writing beyond its previous cloistered existence, and there has

been no better time to strengthen affiliations between the two instructional levels, due not only to their mutual interests, but also because such partnerships are rapidly becoming necessary for the advancement of creative writing as an essential discipline.

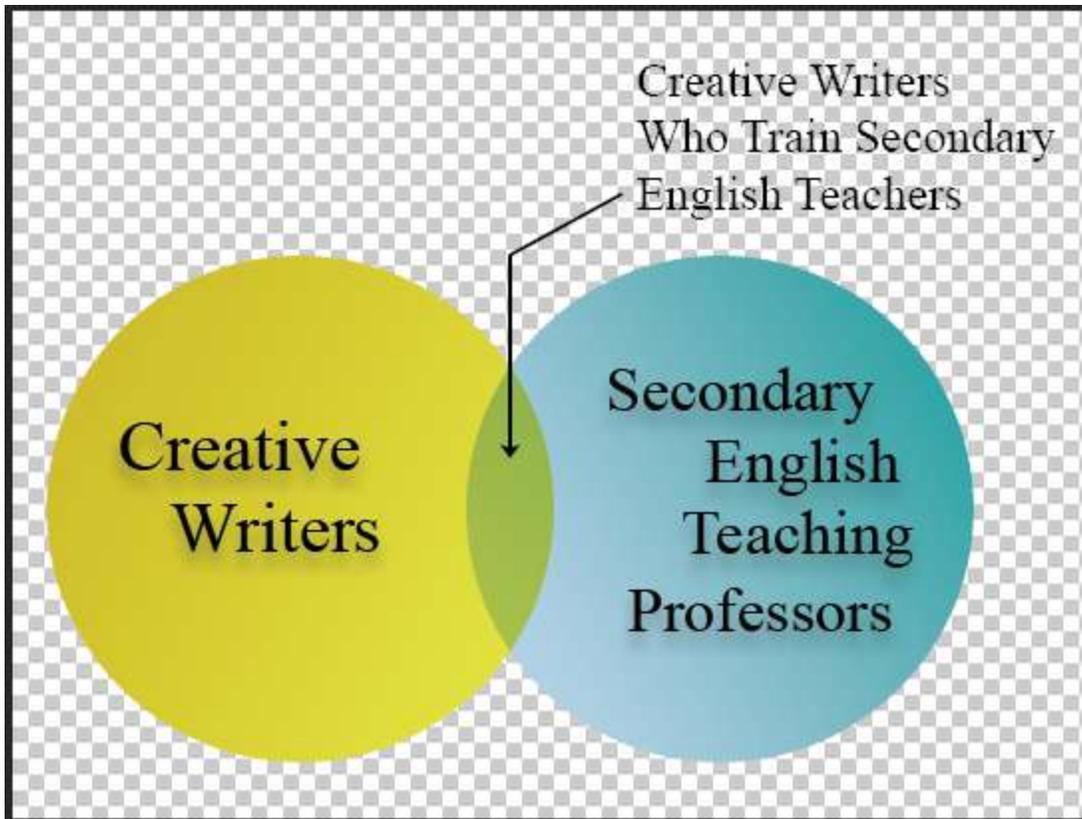
The Necessity of Collaboration

A primary reason for such necessity is today's STEM-centric standards-based curricula and the specific language they use to shape ELA instruction, often interpreted to endorse the omission of creative work in favor of more familiar and easily assessed aspects of the ELA curriculum such as expository writing or literary comprehension. Whether this perception is accurate or not (and it's not), one of its practical effects has been on teacher training programs housed in postsecondary English departments, usually structured to meet specific content and grade-level standards. For instance, our English Teaching program at Indiana State University, accredited and nationally recognized through the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), requires students to complete the following coursework: nine credit hours of expository writing, 36 hours of literature, six hours of grammar and language history, four hours of teaching methods, and nine additional courses in the College of Education ("English Teaching," 2017). However, based on state and national requirements and standards, they are also never required to take a creative writing course, which is not unusual in ELA teacher-prep programs in the United States.

While our program ensures creative writing pedagogy is addressed in methods courses (and students are nudged toward creative writing electives), it is challenging to fully integrate such pedagogy into the program because NCTE's accreditation standards seem to base accreditation primarily on pedagogical instruction in literature and expository writing. Specifically, its standards are divided between "reading" and "writing," a logical division, but the writing standards are couched in language that privileges expository writing. The standards related to evaluating candidates' approaches to teaching writing, for example, are listed under the heading "Content Pedagogy: Planning Composition Instruction in ELA" ("NCTE/NCATE," 2012, p. 1). While creative work is certainly also

“composed,” most teachers associate the term “composition” with traditional expository writing. Examination of the Common Core standards, or the Indiana-specific standards used in my program, reveals a similar issue: creative writing is addressed through occasional use of the word “narrative” as a less-frequent type of writing sometimes accompanying the more common “analytical,” “expository,” or “research” categories (National Governors, 2010; “English/Language Arts,” 2014). (Of course, “narrative” is also a notably limited way to encapsulate fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, and mixed media creative works.) Put simply, each document minimizes creative writing instruction, either through omission or devaluation, and when such a necessary component of pedagogical training is glossed over, programs that train ELA teachers will do the same, producing fewer ELA teachers who employ creative writing in their classrooms as effectively as they might.

Why do these standards uniformly neglect creative writing? Partially, it’s due to the lack of creative writing pedagogues engaging secondary ELA instruction, internally or externally. Postsecondary creative writing programs do not typically include training in secondary instruction, and given the emphasis on composition and literary analysis in secondary ELA classrooms, the relatively few English professors supervising secondary ELA teacher training tend to have backgrounds in those disciplines. These factors create an unusually narrow “cat’s eye” of overlap between creative writers and those who train secondary teachers.



Because of this, many ELA teachers have little formal training in creative writing, either as a students or teachers. While I am aware of no data identifying the percentage of secondary teachers who took at least one creative writing course in college, I suspect the number is middling at best, and that the percentage of ELA teachers with formal, specific training in creative writing pedagogy is even lower. Personally, I enjoyed teaching creative writing in middle/high school, but everything I knew about *how* to teach it came from taking my own creative writing courses as an undergraduate, none of which focused on pedagogy. In fact, I never heard the phrase “creative writing pedagogy” until I attended graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Did that make me an ineffective teacher in my 7th grade classroom? No, but it did limit the pedagogical tools at my disposal.

Of course, there *are* programs currently embedding creative writing pedagogy into ELA teacher education, but many are forced to take my approach, “smuggling” it into existing

methods courses focused specifically on ELA instruction. Others incorporate it into master's programs tailored for practicing teachers. Valdosta State University, for instance, requires returning teachers to complete English 7500: Creative Writing for Language Arts Teachers, which stands alongside other discrete requirements focused on research methods, composition, literature, and grammar ("Course Descriptions," 2017). Such programs address ELA much more holistically and add useful creative writing techniques to teachers' *oeuvres*, and current teachers looking to better integrate creative writing into their curricula, as well as English Teaching professors hoping to add creative writing pedagogy to their programs, would do well to look to such examples.

To be clear, pedagogically sound creative writing instruction has never been wholly dependent on teacher training programs. It is already present in numerous secondary classrooms, and the teachers designing it do not need postsecondary pedagogues to rush in and transform their already-effective practices. I know that this issue of *Wisconsin English Journal*, for example, will be full of useful and hard-won instructional approaches to teaching creative writing originated and shared by exemplary ELA teachers. However, I suspect that many of those teachers also understand the value of lifelong learning and will be eager to access the growing cache of creative writing pedagogy being developed at the postsecondary level, treating it as a resource library to draw inspiration from and adapt to augment their existing classroom approaches.

I certainly encountered such approaches during my time as a secondary teacher. When I taught freshman and junior ELA at Mater Dei High School in Evansville, Indiana, our department was fortunate to have a dedicated creative writing elective, and though I didn't teach it, I spent a good deal of time interrogating the teacher who did, always looking for ways to incorporate his tools into my own classes. I often suggested he write an article about this or that activity, and he always just smiled and changed the subject. It's understandable why more secondary teachers *don't* write scholarly pedagogy articles: it's a huge time commitment for already-overworked professionals, and the remuneration is often paltry. I suspect some also feel unqualified to write such works. (I would have felt that way during my time as a secondary teacher, not yet aware of the valuable primary research occurring in my classroom.) That doesn't change the fact that more teachers

should be writing those books and articles, though, because secondary creative writing will not be fully appreciated until it is codified and systematized in the ways composition and literature already are, and because no one is better equipped to write them than the educators who have developed the best practices and approaches in their classroom laboratories. Put another way, no one knows how to teach ELA better than ELA teachers, and it is my hope that they will view the resources discussed in this article as raw materials for further developing instruction, rather than as narrowly-defined prescriptions.

The Advantages of Collaboration

For those teaching creative writing in colleges and universities, it's equally reasonable to consider the benefit of making connections with our secondary colleagues. We have many other obligations within our own departments and institutions, much like secondary teachers, and it's tempting to just hope the traditional interested parties of composition and literature can continue their maintenance of secondary teacher training programs. No doubt, it would be easier to go on teaching as many of us have, without involvement in a broader pedagogical community. The reality, however, is that all creative writing teachers have a vested interest in ensuring their pedagogies are represented at all levels because the movement towards omnipresent standards and assessments, having washed over secondary schools nationwide, is now creeping upward into higher education, bringing preconceived notions about education, including ELA, with it. Postsecondary teachers must learn from their secondary counterparts on the front lines of this encroachment.

When I speak with secondary teachers, I am amazed how fully these requirements have insinuated themselves into schools during the twelve years since I taught my last high school class, and if a frustration for them is that their professors did not always effectively train them to teach creative writing in this standards-based environment, the reverse pathway is also perilous: soon (much sooner than many professors realize), postsecondary institutions will be similarly beholden to standards and assessments. A

2013 *Washington Post* article titled “A Warning to College Profs from a High School Teacher” makes the following prediction, which I am sharing in its sobering entirety:

Those who have imposed the mindless and destructive patterns of misuse of tests to drive policy in K–12 education are already moving to impose it on higher education, at least in the case of the departments and schools of education that prepare teachers: they want to “rate” those departments by the test scores of the students taught by their graduates.

If you, as someone who teaches in the liberal arts or engineering or business, think that this development does not concern you, think again. It is not just that schools and colleges of education are major sources of revenue for colleges and universities--they are in fact often cash cows, which is why so many institutions lobby to be able initially to certify teachers and then to offer the courses (and degrees) required for continuing certification. If strictures like these can be imposed on schools and colleges of education, the time will be short before similar kinds of measure are imposed on other schools, including liberal arts, engineering, business, and conceivably even professional schools like medicine and law. (Strauss)

While this warning targets all of higher education, creative writing is particularly vulnerable to such encroachment. The political push for standards and assessments, contrary to an old axiom, appears to roll uphill, and university administrators enamored with the data these assessments supply have hastened their implementation at the postsecondary level. In 2013, the newly installed president of Purdue University and former governor of Indiana, Mitch Daniels, mandated a standardized assessment of students’ intellectual growth while at Purdue, using a tool known as the Collegiate Learning Assessment Plus. In 2015, as the deadline approached for its implementation, Purdue faculty pushed back, questioning its validity and suggesting that an internal tool might be more effectively calibrated. Daniels rejected this request, pointing out that “it’s important to be able to compare Purdue to other institutions” (Flaherty, 2015), and as of this writing, assessment implementation plans are moving forward. Purdue is hardly

alone in this endeavor. A more general study from the American Educational Research Association asserts that “assessment is increasingly the lynchpin for higher education and broader success” and that “understanding and improving higher education student learning outcomes is core to steering and propelling the growth of higher-order human capital” (Melguizo & Coates, 2017, p. 1).

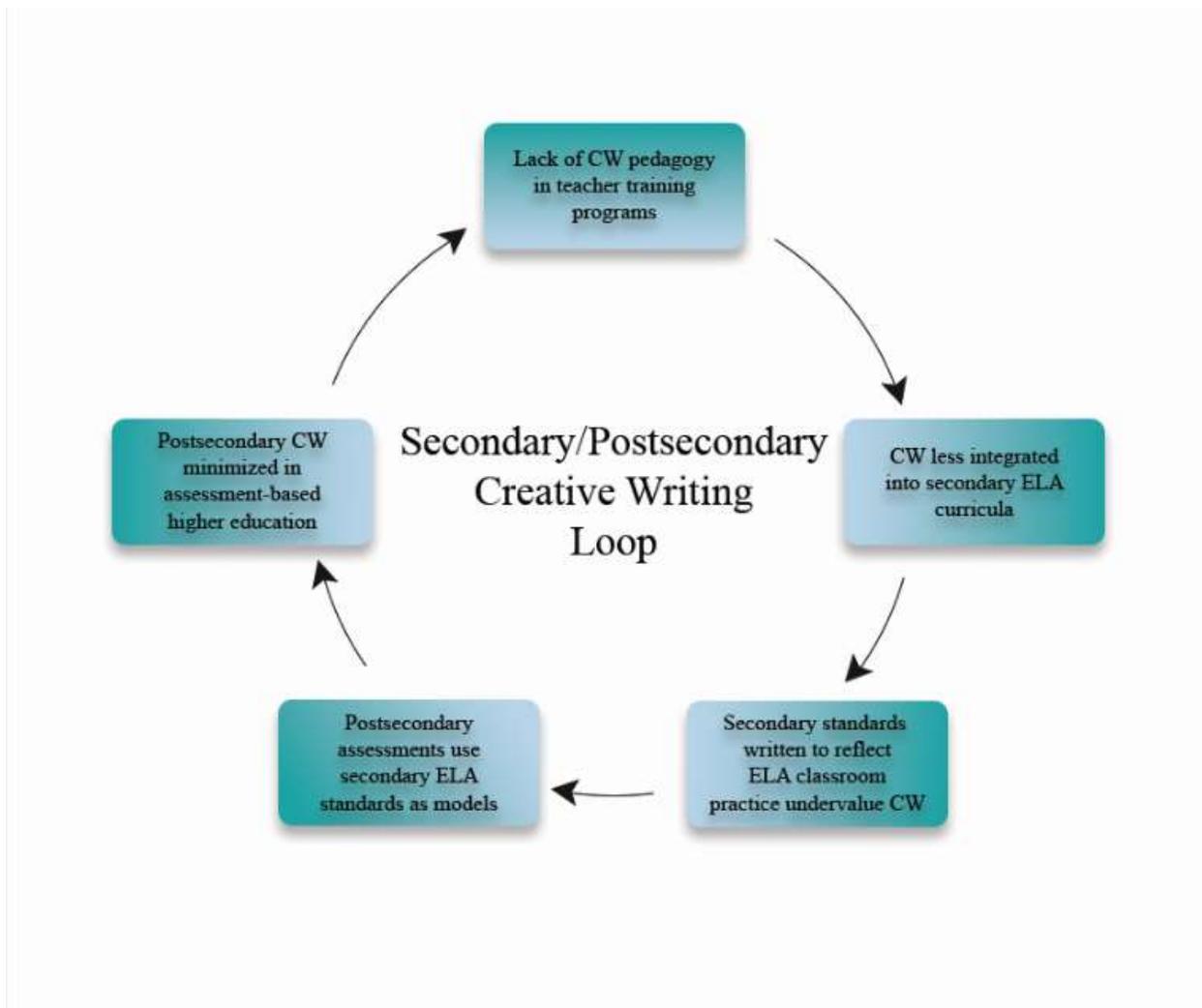
Such commodification of students and their teachers has become more common through the framework of educational standards, and as those standards continue to gain purchase institutionally and departmentally, those imposing them will look to successful examples, including those already deployed at the secondary level. While much of this infiltration should be resisted, it would be foolish not to prepare for its progression. If standards and assessments are someday written to evaluate postsecondary English departments, those in composition and literary studies will be able to correlate their expectations with national and state standards crafted to help define their disciplines at the secondary level, often with their assistance. While postsecondary creative writing’s internal considerations of its teaching goals and purposes have intensified in recent years, scholars have not yet connected that work to the types of standards with which readers of this article are likely familiar--those that carry weight with administrators and legislators.

While this lack of input may seem minor at present, the effects can already be observed in postsecondary English programs. In my own department, for instance, there are two undergraduate majors--English Teaching and English Liberal Arts--and the State of Indiana requires both majors to share a core curriculum, which helps students easily move between the two majors and also ensures that ELA teachers in Indiana are well versed in their discipline. Our own department has historically determined the English Liberal Arts curriculum, but in recent years the English Teaching major has been modified to address the Indiana Content Standards for Educators. As a result, these standards have also begun to influence the liberal arts major, and, once again, they make almost no explicit mention of creative writing. We are fortunate to have multiple faculty versed in creative writing pedagogy who recognize that standards addressing our candidates’ ability to teach the “components of writing,” “writing process,” “the research process,” “analysis and interpretation of literary texts,” and even “interpersonal

communication” (“Indiana Content,” 2010, p. 1) can be partially met through creative writing. Without that firsthand expertise, however, such general language and assumption of its exclusive connection to composition and literature might further diminish creative writing’s already limited role in our English major.

It’s reasonable to ask why such convoluted postsecondary curriculum issues should concern secondary ELA teachers. The answer is relatively straightforward: when more general standards are foisted on departments such as ours as part of the “standardization” of college majors and coursework, where will the writers of those standards look for templates and examples? One likely place is preexisting standard sets such as Common Core, which have been partially determined, tested, and revised by secondary ELA teachers. At this nexus, the two halves of the pedagogical coin--teachers of creative writing at the secondary and postsecondary levels--become caught in a loop:

1. future secondary teachers receive scant training in creative writing pedagogy due to lack of emphasis in postsecondary methods courses and teaching programs,
2. the absence of systematized creative writing pedagogy in many secondary classrooms results in creative writing being less fully integrated into the curriculum than composition and literature,
3. the standards written to reflect and shape current classroom instructional practices and curricula devalue creative writing,
4. as standards begin to influence postsecondary curricula, the codified devaluation of creative writing creeps upward, and
5. postsecondary English departments are even less likely to train their students in creative writing pedagogy.



This cycle is dangerous to the ongoing evolution of creative writing as a discipline, but it cannot be remedied from either secondary or postsecondary perspectives alone. Both groups *can* effect change separately: postsecondary instructors can take an active interest in establishing creative writing as a “tentpole” discipline in the training of future educators, while secondary ELA teachers can refine their approaches to teaching creative writing, champion its ability to address a variety of educational standards, and ultimately influence its conspicuous inclusion in those standards. To maximize opportunities for the advancement of creative writing as a discipline, though, both groups must also identify

useful avenues of collaboration emphasizing sound pedagogy and demonstrating its efficacy as a fully integrated component of holistic ELA instruction.

Opportunities for Collaboration

Such a pedagogical alliance must acknowledge that educators at each level work in different environments, and sometimes toward different purposes, but it should also develop a shared toolset of common pedagogical frameworks, terminologies, and resources. What might this collaboration look like? Or, to return to the original question, how might we begin useful dialogue with each other? Such efforts can begin at the organizational, pedagogical, and institutional levels.

From an organizational point of view, a first necessary step toward cultivating these relationships is assembling like-minded pedagogues within our own ranks. Anyone with an interest in developing shared pedagogy between levels should have a seat at the table, and those with experience at both levels will be particularly valuable because they are pedagogically bilingual. These core groups must then reach out to corresponding scholars on the “other side” of the secondary/postsecondary divide, both directly and through conferences and meetings. For example, teachers from all levels share a good deal of pedagogy and materials at the annual NCTE convention. Creative writing pedagogues should look to such multi-level conferences within ELA as important contact zones for exchanging ideas and approaches. Collaborative panels can be proposed and subgroups within these organizations can be established, and on a practical level, teaching ideas can be shared through session presentations. As an example, when I attended the 2015 NCTE convention in Minneapolis, I attended a panel featuring two middle school faculty members—an ELA teacher and a school librarian—who collaboratively used National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) and its accompanying online resources to help students practice sustained creative writing and editing through use of milestones, book evaluations, and daily word goals while correlating student achievement with the Common Core state standards (Burgeson & Strous, 2015).

Similarly, the Creative Writing Studies Organization (CWSO), a professional organization with an explicit focus on creative writing pedagogy, holds an annual conference and also publishes the *Journal of Creative Writing Studies*, an open access journal that explores academic approaches to creative writing. While many of its articles focus on postsecondary instruction, others are more general or focus explicitly on secondary teaching. A recent article by Gunsburg (2016), for example, considers the benefit of asking students to consciously consider design as a component of writing, both on the page and sentence level, and provides a number of practical examples they can examine. Additionally, a number of CWSO members have experience with, and a continuing interest in, secondary teaching, and would welcome opportunities for collaboration across levels. With effort, such activities at conferences and within organizations will generate systematized resources that directly address secondary creative writing, which in turn will broaden the audience for these issues.

Limiting such interaction to official organizations and conferences would be problematic, however, because while most postsecondary teachers are encouraged or required to attend national events, many secondary teachers have neither the time nor the funding to do so. In such situations, opportunities for collaboration within secondary schools are an important component of current pedagogy. (For secondary creative writing teachers who may not be aware of the wealth of books and anthologies currently available that explore creative writing pedagogy from a practical, classroom-based point of view, representative examples are provided in Appendix A.) In the recent anthology *Creative Writing Pedagogies for the Twenty-First Century*, Smitherman and Vanderslice (2015) examine the pedagogical value of service learning for their creative writing students, including the Writers in the Schools program (p. 162), which pairs college creative writing students with those in secondary classrooms. From the postsecondary viewpoint, such programs offer a chance for the visiting students to share their work and see themselves more clearly as writers, but from the secondary perspective, it also allows middle and high school students to interact with writers and learn about their processes and approaches to creative work. (We recently started such a program at ISU, and the results are entirely positive, with a pilot class of juniors producing poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction that amazed both their teacher and us.) Such activities can also be modeled downward, with

secondary teachers supervising their own students' engagement with service learning by visiting primary classrooms to share their own work and processes.

More generally, secondary teachers can also explore the resources provided by the Writers in the Schools (WITS) Alliance (2017), an umbrella organization that includes a number of regional chapters and offers additional tools and training for secondary teachers, including workshops, teaching resources, and collaborative coaching, many of which are designed to provide new, pedagogically sound approaches to creative writing in the secondary classroom with guidance from professional writers.

An additional benefit of secondary schools serving as contact zones is the opportunity for pedagogical exchange, offering secondary teachers and students concrete examples of successful creative writing activities used in college courses, while also exposing postsecondary writers to lessons and activities with which they may not be familiar. With slight modifications to these programs, visiting writers and their host teachers can become pedagogical collaborators, forging alliances between institutions and opening channels of communication regarding creative writing instruction. The more visiting writers become comfortable with sharing their works and the assignments which often initiate them, the more secondary students and teachers can learn about varieties of activities that can not only inspire creativity, but also tap into pre-existing elements of the ELA classroom, such as research methods. For example, Day (2017) teaches a creative writing course at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, which requires students to develop research methodologies to provide material for stories set in various eras of Muncie's past (p. 171). If those students then shared those stories with secondary classes, including the research process they utilized to construct them, those classes would not only learn much about the craft of creative writing, but both students and teachers could explore the real-world applicability of research tools they already use. In many ways, this activity could become even more dynamic in a secondary environment where team teaching occurs, allowing social studies teachers to add important historical dimensions to students' research.

Another aspect of current creative writing pedagogy particularly suited to secondary classrooms is the idea that creative writing need not be limited to the ELA classroom. Work by Peary (2015) on creative writing's use in non-English classrooms at the university level can be easily adapted to secondary curricula. While those in higher education occasionally engage Writing across the Curriculum, it is much more prevalent in secondary schools to address writing standards now present in most disciplines. The default approach to Writing across the Curriculum in non-ELA secondary classrooms is often to assign a basic research or reflective essay, but Peary's work offers useful alternatives, arguing that demonstrating knowledge through creative writing allows students to take on a "spectator stance" when writing creatively, considering their subjects and demonstrating learned knowledge more deeply (p. 65). Students are more likely to be interested and engaged in creative work, especially in disciplines where it's traditionally considered off-limits or irrelevant. Asking a student to write a story about traveling back in time to meet Dwight Eisenhower, Madam Curie, or Euclid, for instance, still provides an opportunity to demonstrate reading comprehension and content mastery, but also engages students' creative impulses and authorial investment more effectively, often resulting in more carefully considered and compelling work. (And again, such an assignment would be particularly useful in cross-disciplinary teaching teams, with the social studies, science, or math teacher assessing content and the ELA teacher assessing the writing itself.) Teachers interested in developing such classroom practices might collaborate with postsecondary pedagogues to arrange workshops or in-service training, and then spearhead implementation with their faculty, who would likely welcome an opportunity to meet their discipline-specific writing standards using assignments other than the five-paragraph essay. In the process, opportunities for contemplative student writing would increase, and the utility of creative writing would be better understood throughout the secondary curriculum.

Finally, formal engagement and collaboration between secondary and postsecondary institutions would bring interested parties together regionally and help add permanence to such relationships. At my institution, for example, I serve on a committee that brings together College of Education administrators, discipline-specific professors, and superintendents and principals from surrounding schools. During these meetings, issues

and ideas are discussed that could not be fully addressed by any one of the groups represented. The college officials help the secondary administrators better understand how we prepare our teachers for work in their schools, while the secondary members help those of us at the college level appreciate the practical demands of secondary instruction that we don't often deal with directly. Additionally, I serve as the dual-credit coordinator for my English Department by supervising high school courses taught for college credit, and conducting a workshop each summer for dual-credit teachers to keep them current regarding instructional practices and institution-specific requirements. My experience in both of these capacities has shown me that, when properly implemented, collaborative activities between secondary and postsecondary professionals at the institutional level are valuable for all parties. Using such models, creative writing teachers can create additional lines of communication for pedagogical exploration, providing improved access for secondary teachers to current pedagogical developments and allowing postsecondary teachers to engage educational standards more directly and better understand the practical classroom considerations that can affect their pedagogies. Imagine such a meeting where all parties discuss their use of the creative writing workshop/peer review in their classes, and everyone returns to their institutions with new tools in their pedagogical toolbox for refining such a central activity.

Another avenue for such collaboration is social media, and many creative writing pedagogues can be found in the Facebook group "Creative Writing Pedagogy" (n.d.), which focuses on the teaching of creative writing at the postsecondary level while also engaging a number of issues relevant to any creative writing teacher. (Anyone can request membership, with admission based only on adherence to common-sense posting rules.) As of this writing, a cursory glance at just the last week of posts reveals detailed conversations on teaching creative writing without homework, definitions of creative nonfiction, and creative writing based on interviews with community members. Taking a cue from this page, interested secondary teachers could jump into the discussions, contact other members with shared interests, or even start a parallel Facebook page or other social media presence for secondary teachers, all of which would begin the process of collecting best practices from a range of teachers and classroom environments. Workshops, collaborative committees, and social media can all help foster the shared

interests of teachers at all levels, offering dynamic pedagogies and helping champion the full interdisciplinary potential of creative writing as a classroom activity.

Summation

Collaborative endeavors such as those outlined in the previous section will establish communication channels and working relationships between secondary and postsecondary teachers that, if sustained, will mutually benefit educators at both levels interested in utilizing creative writing in our classrooms, broadening our discipline, and codifying our practices. They will also help amplify the influence of creative writing pedagogy in education and keep its evolving narrative under the oversight of the teachers who understand it and have worked to cultivate it. As the standardization of education continues at the secondary level and begins in earnest at the postsecondary level, these activities will not only help protect creative writing as a pedagogical tool, but also increase its value alongside and within the ELA disciplines of composition and literature.

However, such goals are not simply bulwarks against disdained policies and procedures. They also present a long-overdue opportunity to alter and evolve some core approaches to ELA instruction. Secondary teachers interested in teaching creative writing or simply building creative writing activities into existing ELA units and lessons should work to demonstrate the value of such efforts to administrators and other officials, allowing further correlation with their state standards, while those in higher education should work to ensure that future secondary teachers receive clear and useful training in creative writing pedagogy. If we embrace these opportunities, we will move creative writing pedagogy forward as a unified discipline across the breadth of secondary/postsecondary instruction, providing new and exciting learning opportunities for our students and ensuring that creativity is not discarded in the age of STEM.

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Appendix A: Classroom-Based Approaches to Teaching Creative Writing

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