

Creative Writing— Making Meaning

By Douglas A. Jones

In the rush to implement a practical, nuts-and-bolts curriculum that prepares students for more advanced work, schools often fail to recognize the benefits of creative writing. Yet in my classroom, I've found that the more intuitive or creative assignments are where my students flourish as writers. Of course, labeling such assignments "creative" sets up an unfortunate dichotomy; producing writing of any kind is a *creative* endeavor. But let's consider the benefits of assigning writing that does not fall under the label of *scholarly, analytical, or technical*—such as poetry, drama, fiction, or even the short familiar essay.

First, why should we devote any time at all to creative writing? With so many demands on the language arts/English teacher's time and resources, how can we justify including this area in the curriculum? Can't we teach the necessary writing skills by assigning themes and research papers or through brief essays or news stories? Is there really a place for the "artistic" in the writing classroom?

I'd like to argue that (for the most part) we offer creative writing in our schools for reasons other than skill-building. Of course, our students will build composition skills through creative writing, but that should not be our primary objective in giving such assignments. Rather, we want *our students to use language to make meaning*. By this, I mean that creative writing helps learners to write about what is important to them. Through language, they can explore their own ideas and opinions and discover their own meanings. This is the student's own search for understanding,

undertaken within his or her own language skills. In writing plays and limericks, poems and song lyrics, our students can grapple with the power of language and have fun. They play with words as they construct meaning. It's a natural pursuit, one they've been at since the cradle. And now, we give them academic credit to do so! In many ways, creative writing is a freeing experience for students because it encourages them to do what often comes naturally. Of course, depending on the grade level, we do expect a certain amount of sophistication and control, but creative writing allows students to explore their lives and the questions they live with in innovative and meaningful ways.

What About Form?

My most important objective in

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planning a creative writing course or assignment is for the student to "make meaning." However, there can be additional objectives. The very nature of creative writing is *form-conscious*; the writing's style and structure, as well as how it looks on the page, are obvious considerations. Keeping in mind the grade level and linguistic sophistication of the students, it is valid to start by looking at form. When I teach a college-level poetry-writing class, I organize

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most of the work around a variety of poetic genres, usually starting with the sonnet to highlight the issue of form. On the secondary level, I also introduce form, but allow students to vary from it. Let's face it: Poetic form is a highly sophisticated dynamic, and not all students see themselves as poets. I'd much rather have my students succeed in making meaning on their own terms—using their own creative structures—than to have them wrench their words unnaturally to force them into some format I've imposed.

When I teach form in creative writing classes at the elementary and secondary levels, I usually start with the haiku,* which is not too difficult for young writers to emulate. Using this delicate and uncomplicated Japanese poetic form, my students are willing to accept the challenge of fitting their words into a prescribed layout. When I present the haiku, I explain how it can act as a snapshot of nature. I say that haiku tradition does not rely on lots of predication or explanation, but that we are building a little image, a little picture.

I once presented this idea in a ninth-grade English class by taping three-inch-square masking tape outlines to the windows of the classroom. Each student was assigned one of the little frames. From their desks, students were to note what they saw and try to distill it into a haiku of 17 syllables. The results were stunning. By concentrating on a small window “canvas,” the students produced an impressive panorama of small haiku poems. They captured the delicate iridescence of a bearded iris just outside the window and the freeform

*The haiku form is a three-line poem with the first and last lines made up of five syllables each and the second line made up of seven syllables.

antics of barn swallows flying over an overgrown field. (The masking tape windows were a great hit. Students decorated their own little frames and used them in journal assignments later in the month. Using this restricted perspective, they wrote some interesting short, descriptive essays.)

If you live near a Japanese garden (or wilderness park or a botanical garden), take your students on an afternoon field trip, armed with note pads and pencils. Once they settle down to the magic of the place, they'll surprise themselves with the reflective poetry they create. During one such trip, I asked each student to bring back no fewer than three haiku poems that conformed to the syllable expectations of the genre, and gave extra credit for additional poems. This approach has been very effective.

Who's Your Audience?

As my students make meaning through creative writing, I also want them to consider their audience. Of course, a lot of their work is self-directed, but I encourage them to write for a larger audience as well. Having short dramas written and produced by the class is an excellent way to foster awareness of an audience. One 10th-grade class that grew weary of reviewing the parts of speech decided they would have more fun—and learn bet-

ter—if they could write a short skit about the grammar lesson. So they wrote a parody of the Grammy Awards program—and called it the Grammar Awards. For about three days, they worked (pretty hard) at listing the nominees for best modifier in an adjective role (*sneaky*, *immature*, and *gross* were the contenders) and the most valuable preposition. They also nominated other parts of speech. Each class member contributed to the mini-drama, and each took part when the class presented its production in a special school assembly.

One of my most effective creative writing assignments emphasizing audience also incorporated collaborative writing and acting into a production for a student group.

To start, I sat 12 to 15 students in a circle and asked each to write a word on a small piece of paper. I collected the words and had each student select one at random from a hat. Students teamed up in twos or threes to write a short play based on the words they selected. The play was then performed by the pair immediately to the right of those who wrote it.

This assignment has some definite benefits: It gets students into the creative process without their being bogged down trying to choose an idea and get it on paper—the words are already there and waiting. The writing team already knows who (personality

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traits, gender, physical characteristics, etc.) their actors will be and can write to their strengths and qualities. And they know who their audience is, so they can write accordingly.

This assignment—which is designed to underscore the importance of audience in the creative process—can easily take a full week of class time to complete, although I’ve used it effectively as a one-day workshop for creative writers. I direct the students to fill up no more than 10 pages of script, complete with stage directions and character description, and encourage them not to rely on props or elaborate settings to further their plots. My students’ mini-plays have taken shape in a variety of forms—as surreal morality plays, psychiatrist-patient dialogues, and long-distance telephone conversations—all presented with a great deal of laughter and lots of flair. Some of the plays find their way to assemblies, weeks of prayer, and student talent shows. Again, the students have made meaning through “play” with language.

A Familiarity With Text

For the teaching of creative writing to be successful, students must have experienced creative text as readers or listeners. If they have not read a variety of genres, we can’t expect them to feel comfortable about using different creative writing forms. It is our challenge (and privilege) to help students connect with literature. When they see the different ways that authors use “creative writing” to create meaning, they will begin to see how expressive and intuitive approaches can be used to explore their own feelings and ideas.

And that brings us back to the “why” of teaching creative writing. We offer opportunities for creative writing so our students can express themselves. A poetry assignment offers a way for them to make a published poem more rewarding to read. When I teach selections from Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” I ask my students to model this approach to poetry. After we’ve read the lists and names of rivers and mountain ranges, the inventories of human experience, the cataloging of flowers and animals in the poem, my

students write their own “Songs of Themselves.” Many of my students have written mature, thoughtful inventories of places of personal importance and lists of significant memories of childhood, as they connect with Whitman’s poems.

Creative writing is a natural response to the literary event. In college literature classes, I often encourage students to write a poem in response to a novel. One of the most memorable of these responses was a free-verse poem written from the point of view of Mayella Ewell, the abused accuser of Tom Robinson in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. And I’ve read prayers written from the point of a literary character—imagine Pip (from Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*) on his knees before God as one student did in an undergraduate literature course. Creative writing can be a powerful learning tool for our students to explore literature and to personalize the beauty and drama of the world’s best writing.

But creative writing need not be used only for responding to literature. It of course stands on its own merit in the lives of our students. Creative writing is a natural way for young people to express their most personal questions and to address the perplexities of growing up. Some of our students are already in tune with this aspect of language. But many must be coaxed to explore their feelings and to value creative writing. So we must keep looking for new ways to involve them.

To do this, I try not to put too much stress on grammar, spelling, or punctuation when the real emphasis should be on creativity. That can be difficult, since these important elements of composition contribute significantly to a piece’s overall effectiveness. But those matters can fall into place later on. My goal in creative writing is for the student to enjoy making meaning. To nudge this pursuit, I present low-risk assignments—writing projects that can be accomplished easily within a class period. I may pass out lined writing paper with a colorful photo stapled to it and ask the students to write whatever comes to mind about the photo. This does not produce great literature, but it does re-

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sult in great playfulness. The next day, I tack their stories/poems/essays onto the bulletin board, and we have an “art gallery” opening, all of us milling around and reading the text.

Even more fun was the time I gave two cherry tomatoes and a small index card to each student in my junior high class. The assignment was to eat one tomato and then fill every line on the card with a description of the taste and texture. They were then to eat the second tomato and contemplate what they’d written. Finally, they were to write a descriptive paragraph or a short haiku-like poem on the unlined back of the card. Another time, we wrote the opening three sentences to a reflective essay on summertime using this approach (plums or peaches also work well for this project). I still bump into former students who remember these assignments!

I don’t think it’s possible to give too many creative writing assignments in our schools. These opportunities to make meaning and to play with words clearly pay off by enhancing students’ interest in the written word. Through meaning-making creative writing, our students will better understand themselves and others, while stretching themselves linguistically. ☞

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