Creative Writing In Other Writing Classes

by

Richard Jewell

I managed to surprise two different chairpersons of my English Department when they discovered, each in their own terms of office, that I accepted story writing and poetry for teaching freshman composition. Worse yet, I actually gave a graded story writing assignment.

"How can you do that?" asked one chairperson. "The course is meant to teach formal writing."

The other chair asked, in words close to these, "Can you justify the assignments in terms of course goals?"

I could and did. The bulk of my teaching of writing has been, as it often is for most writing teachers, "noncreative" writing courses. And I have managed to find ways to put creative writing into all of them—and demonstrate this to other faculty members as well.

Creative writing means, to me, storytelling, poetry, plotting and direction, description, dialogue, metaphor, originality, brainstorming freely, diving deeply, soaring, and exploration and discovery. My background in creative writing has been the publication of some short stories in both literary and popular journals and magazines, arts residencies in schools, several regional literary awards, and teaching creative writing. I have used creative writing methods in traditional writing and grammar teaching materials, journaling, process, and research writing, and even in across-the-curriculum writing programs. I believe that creative writing is one of the best methods of teaching available to us, and that it can be justified to other teachers and used in a wide variety of ways.

I'll discuss the pedagogical assumptions of this paper below, and then suggest some ways that creative writing can be useful in a variety of composition and other writing courses.

Pedagogical Viewpoint of Paper

The point of view for this paper is not that creative writing is the best or only way to teach writing. Rather, the point is that creative writing is one way to teach writing—and a very strong and useful ingredient at that.

Considering creative writing as one part of teaching composition is what James A. Berlin calls "transactional" in *Rhetoric and Reality—Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*. He divides writing theories into three kinds: "Objective theories locate reality in the external world, in the

material objects of experience. Subjective theories place truth within the subject, to be discovered through an act of internal apprehension. And transactional theories locate reality at the point of interaction of subject and object, with audience and language as mediating agencies" (6).
Ken Macrorie describes these three theories in *Uptaught* using his famous (and infamous) "three ways" definition: "In the First Way the teacher hands out a package of information and tests to see whether students can remember.... In the Second Way, the teacher provides complete freedom and no direction.... In the Third Way,...students operate with freedom and discipline" (27).

Creative writers and creative writing teachers often are suspected, in noncreative writing classes, of being too subjective, too "Second Way." Yet if one tries to define useful writing of teaching as that which offers both objective and subjective methods—both First and Second Way methods—then creative writing takes its proper place as one strong and vital way of teaching so-called noncreative writing classes.

Object and subject, formula and voice—both are vital to producing proper academic and work-related writing. That is the transactional or Third Way point of view from which this paper is written.

Many ways of teaching noncreative writing classes start with, assume, or require an objective system, so it is these ways especially that we will touch upon.

Traditional developmental modes

Traditional developmental modes of writing in composition classes include such categories as comparison and contrast, exemplification, division or classification, cause and effect, definition, process, narration, and description.

Many of these can be taught by starting with creative writing and then working with initial creative efforts to build final developmental assignments.

One of the key elements to getting past the tired formula writing that so many beginning writers tend to produce is to teach students to brainstorm. Tired writing comes when we give specific assignments such as to "write a definition" or "write a cause-and-effect paper," and show examples, and then ask the students to duplicate the pattern "in their own words." We often end up with cliched writing which one teacher, Macrorie, calls "Engfish."

Macrorie, before devising his Third Way, had taught prescription composition courses for sixteen years, growing increasingly tired of them, until finally he found what was for him a way to break through. What he broke through to was writing with strong, interesting, authentic voices. The

method he discovered was to start with brainstorming—also known as free writing. Here is how it happened for him:

> The winter had been dark and spirits down. I said I could no longer face another student paper written in Engfish. I told my Advanced Writing class, "Go home and write anything that comes to your mind. Don't stop. Write for ten minutes or till you've filled a whole page." ...I asked the girl nearest me to read her paper. She had written about working at an ambulance service.... I thought here we go with the cliche and the standard tired paper. But as she read on, I found...that paper...moved me. Not until I heard the third paper that afternoon did I realize that everyone on the grass had quit gazing around and was listening hard. Each student had written a powerful short paper and I had broken through and the students were speaking in their own voices about things that counted for them.
>
> ...Immediately I tried the same free writing in Freshman Comp and got almost as good papers. ...A whole semester passed before I realized I should *begin* my classes with free writing. ...All those years I had tried to get a student to put down a sensuous detail that would bring alive his ideas and feelings! Now I simply ask students to write freely, first recording random thoughts, then focusing on one subject, and they frequently produce what the poet Wallace Stevens called "the exquisite environment of fact" (20-1).

One of the things that happened to Macrorie's students was that they didn't have time to think first, and then write. As a result, what they produced came more directly from their initial experiences and feelings: the words echoed their own blood, their own pulse. Peter Elbow says in *Writing With Power*, "I...call this power *juice*.... 'Juice' combines the qualities of *magic potion*, *mother's milk*, and *electricity*" (286).

Experiencing personal writing in this way is why, if we want students to write with a strong, interesting voice, we often should start writing courses by asking them to free write--quickly, unselfconsciously, spontaneously: to think on paper, to "hot pen" the subject, to keep the pen moving without worry about form, grade, or content.

Students will begin to get used to just letting go like this, especially if we point out to them that the more personal or immediately expressive they get, the better the writing sometimes will be—and they will not be given a letter grade for these initial efforts.

At this point it is possible to go on to a second stage: free writing within the bounds of a simple form. Most students take well to continuing their free writing experiments while at the same time having a specific, but simple, focus for directing their writing. If they are allowed to make their own choice of subject matter, and if they are told they will not be graded on content (but only, in a final rewritten version, on certain form requirements), this frees them to follow their own voice.

Then it becomes a simple matter of saying something to the students like "Today I'd like you to free write for ten minutes, madly, quickly, even passionately, and as you do so, please describe a person or place with particular meaning for you, present or past, using as much sensory detail as you can, and show the person or place in action and/or in voice, as appropriate."

The results will be truly interesting—if not completely polished—description papers. The same can be done with the other traditional developmental modes. We can keep the free writing directions simple and lean—more to goad students or focus them in a certain direction rather than to require a complex set of standards. We also can have students do this in class once or twice, perhaps even share the results so they can see how others let go in the hoped for direction, and then we can assign one or two more free writings at home.

When it comes time to grade the papers, we can first ask students to more formally rewrite the best of their free writings, and we can set more detailed rewriting requirements at that time.

In this way, we can help students make the traditional developmental modes come alive in composition courses.

Grammatical and pre-college writing

Grammar and basic sentence and paragraph management often are learned more effectively when taught with a creative writing base. Students use grammatical patterns differently just as they write differently: different styles create different grammatical needs. For this reason, students will learn grammar better if they learn to listen to their own grammar first. When students are required to pay attention to their own grammatical ways of expressing their thoughts and feelings, they will learn the need for better grammar.

Often the start of helping students learn grammar and other mechanics of sentence and paragraph writing is to start them with writing strongly. As Macrorie points out, when one encourages the strong writing which is a result of free writing, mechanics may improve, too. "One boy," says Macrorie, "who was flunking the course writing broken sentences and spelling incomprehensibly, turned in a strong account of driving home after a party. His spelling was much improved and he controlled his words" (22).

Interestingly enough, one of the keys to getting good grammar from students is to *not* require it—in fact, to tell students to AVOID worrying about grammar—in their initial drafts. The reasons for this are two-fold:

(1) As mentioned in the Macrorie example above, students will turn out stronger, more natural—and more easily punctuated–

writing than when they are trying to sound like an academic or a Nobel laureate.

(2) They will have more interest in correcting their grammar on a rewritten draft, just because they like their written pieces better and tend, therefore, to be more interested in making them presentable.

(3) Prewriting may also serve the function of pre-ordering: first drafts may be a necessary discovery of what one is thinking before grammatical worries can enter in.

Concerning this third point, historian Priscilla Clark at Roosevelt University says in "Writing Across the Disciplines—A Memo to Colleagues," "pre-writing... inevitably has as astonishing effect upon students' more public, audience-directed prose—and that includes an effect upon grammar. *Often the inability to construct a grammatical sentence is really an inability to clarify one's thoughts to oneself.* [Emphasis mine—RJ.] Syntax, or sentence structure, is a species of ordering; composing a sentence, then, is a way of telling ourselves about relationships. Pre-writing, in the expressive mode, encourages students to do this. ...Pre-writing is a means of achieving higher literacy" (in Klaus and Jones 248).

Personal journaling techniques

Some of the best writing—and strongest voices—of which students are capable may come from personal journaling experiments. However, journaling can be limiting if it is not given some direction. In fact, it can be argued that the very reason personal-journaling attempts sometimes fail in the classroom is that they miss creative writing methods.

Students sometimes are asked to write about their own lives, yet they are left without creative writing methods of going deeper within their inner selves, their experiences, feelings, or memories. In addition, they may have no idea at all how to initiate or carry through any kind of story or poetic expression. In short, personal writing may cause them—and we who have to read the results—to be floundering in a shallow sea of mud instead of diving to new depths of self-discovery.

It is clear, for starters, that journaling does work well for some teachers in composition classes. "It is not fair to our students or to ourselves if we attempt to isolate composition from what is called 'creative writing,'" says Donald M. Murray in *A Writer Teaches Writing*. "The strongest impulse to write is to make meaning of chaos, to celebrate, to record, to attempt to understand the world in which we are living. We should allow our students the opportunity to use writing to see and explore their worlds" (84).

Journal writing seems to help some teachers not only get better writing, but also get better *academic* writing. Journal writing is part of what James Britton and his colleagues called "expressive writing" in their famous 1975 report on *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* in British students.

Such writing is "writing close to the self, carrying forward the informal presuppositions of informal talk and revealing as much about the writer as about his matter. ...Much of this writing...[deals] with matters of primary experience, though we would regard it as equally possible to handle difficult or abstract ideas in expressive writing" (141).

In other words, it is quite possible to move from expressive writing to the kind of academic writing that requires difficult or abstract juggling of ideas.

In fact, personal writing may be necessary to the development of good ideas. Says Britton in his "Foreword" to an NEH/University of Iowa Writing Teacher's Institute book, *Courses For Change*, "It is not only a concern for comfortable approaches to the writing task that leads to an emphasis on personal writing. It must, first, be recognized that expressive writing (an intimate, person to person form of discourse) is particularly appropriate to *discovery*. Being a relaxed form, it allows the writer to take risks; taking risks is necessary to discovery. Nor is that the end of the argument. As a number of the programs in this book have recognized, first-hand experience is an important foundation-stone for all learning" (in Klaus and Jones vi).

One way we can encourage such personally expressive writing is to use the technique found in creative writing that entails digging in or going deeply within. Natalie Goldberg calls this technique "writing down the bones" in her book of the same name on Zen and writing. Poet William Meissner calls it "learning to breath underwater" in his NEA-award-winning poetry book by the same name.

As Meissner expresses it, we can teach students to keep on writing—whether in poems, stories, or personal journals—when they hit the first underwater plateau. It is this first plateau, the first "shelf" in the ocean, at which most writers stop, thinking and feeling they have achieved some depth. The trick though, says Meissner, is to continue on down to the next plateau, then the next, then the next, until we are at the very bottom of the ocean, raking in muck and seaweeds, yes, but also swimming amidst exotic fish, sunken ships, and gold.

We can teach students to explore like this, tentatively, on psychically wobbly legs. It is a dangerous experiment for some students, this diving, it is risky, it is exposing. For this reason, part of this technique requires that we contract with students about how much we will and will not read, and what they can expose safely to us and what they can't to us.

Such journaling not only encourages large amounts of free writing, thus establishing and strengthening natural styles or "voice." It also brings students to academic and work-related interests in a process of decision making which comes from the inside out: they choose subjects based on deep personal interest and the kind of commitment which comes from personal experience rather than choose subjects based on socially or parentally acceptable beliefs and opinions.

One other element we can add to personal journaling is story writing: asking students to write not just mere descriptions of events, but to add plot to them. The purpose of this is to teach them to develop an academic and work-related ability to write strong case histories and examples. Plotting will help them to not just offer research, but to also offer the search for the research--to report in an interesting way. In addition, teaching story writing and plotting also helps teach literature. As Britton says, "Stories—autobiographical and fictional—do not have to enter our writing programs only as approaches to ...writing. Pursued in the direction of literature...they have an essential educative purpose to fulfill:...a second major form of learning" ("Forward" in Klaus and Jones viii-ix).

Plotting is, as author and top literary agent Scott Meredith describes it in his section on plot in *Writing To Sell*, a pattern of three things: (1) hero/heroine, (2) obstacles (or villain), and (3) goal. Most stories have this pattern: (1) good people, (2) obstacles or bad people, and (3) end result or goal to which the good people are striving. This also can be described as: (1) a person, (2) a problem, and (3) a solution (a formula which lends itself particularly to case history and advertisement writing).

Teaching students to form their own important life events in the shape of a plot teaches them how to control and strongly voice experiences in a way immediately understandable and interesting to others. The plotted ad, case history, or example is a classic way to express in detail an idea, belief, or event, and students who grasp how to use this basic technique feel a greater sense of control over their writing of detail.

Research and thesis writing

Good research and thesis writing mean development of original ideas and arguments, and of creative use of quotations, paraphrases, examples, and anecdotes. All of these can be learned and further developed through creative writing methods.

Part of good research writing entails using stages or steps of writing. The first stage or step, brainstorming or "free writing," sometimes is the last step—or one of only two steps, brainstorming and revising—in creative writing classes. However, in thesis and research writing classes, a more complete process is appropriate which involves a middle stage of organization: putting the material into an acceptable form with a visible beginning and ending and topic sections, and fitting in quotations and paraphrases.

In the midst of such formal requirements, it becomes easy for many teachers of writing to lose sight of how to encourage the creative, the original, the spontaneous or "voice-filled" part of research writing.

This is where emphasizing process—writing in several steps—can help.

We can use creative writing techniques to the fullest advantage as we emphasize process. Creative writing techniques may include several methods of brainstorming, development of a strong, original voice, placement of creative passages within the organizational structure of written pieces, and creative additions in the rewriting stage.

For starters, students often must be kept from initial attempts at formula writing, especially if they already have learned such rote style, boring, dull, filled with academies, in high school or younger. Form and formula should come *after* brainstorming, not before.

As Donald Murray says, "The student who demands the formula is the student who, most of all, must be kept from receiving rhetorical patterns that look like formulas and principles or suggestions that the student can turn into rules.... Drafts [grow] organically, out of what is being said and to whom it is being said. Many of the patterns are familiar, but the patterns are not decided on in the best writing before the subject is discovered and explored" (204).

Helping students get good research or thesis topics may be tricky, too. Donald Graves talks of this in relation to primary and secondary students in *Writing: Teachers & Children At Work*. What he says applies to early college writers, too:

> Children who are fed topics, story starters, lead sentences, even opening paragraphs as a steady diet for three or four years, rightfully panic when topics have to come from them. The anxiety is not unlike that of the child whose mother has just turned off the television set [or a college student who misses a soap opera or a weekend date—RJ]. "Now what do I do?" bellows the child....
>
> Writers who do not learn to choose topics wisely lose out on the strong link between voice and subject. A child writes about a topic because he thinks he knows something about it. ...The child thought he'd write about space, but the topic was so broad and vast he felt no sense of control or accomplishment. With experience he learned how to limit as well as to choose elements from his own life that he knew something about. One day six-year-old Sarah wrote a fantasy about a fight with the dark. The fight was real though imaginary. The writing was filled with voice....
>
> The data show that writers who learn to choose topics well make the most significant growth in both information and skills at the point of best topic (21).
>
> Children learn through making decisions. They search their lives and interests. ...With help, they regain control, make better choices. ...They learn to control a subject, limit it, persuade, sequence information, change their language...all to satisfy their own voices, not the voices of others....

> The voice is the dynamo of the writing process, the reason for writing in the first place. The voice starts with the choice of the topic, "I'll write about my accident; that makes me angry; they have no right...."
>
> For some children it may take six months or more to learn to trust their own judgments. Six months is a very short time when we consider that a majority of college freshmen panic at the thought of choosing their subjects, or stumble when trying to limit a topic intelligently (31).

As Graves points out, we help our students research and write formally if we teach them to choose their own subjects intelligently and use their own voices on their subjects. A few other methods may help, too, simple ones. For example, we can teach quotation, paraphrase, and punctuation for quotations by giving students exercises and games using creative dialogue. Or, for example, we can ask students to form short person-problem–solution plots for anecdotes, personal or otherwise, to include in their thesis or research writing. In addition, we can teach them how to use simple similes and metaphors ("War is like a _____: both are _____ and _____") to further explain and detail their arguments and proofs. We also can encourage them to choose quotations that have strong authorial voice in them, as we encourage the students' own voices.

Across-the-curriculum writing

Writing in other disciplines requires, just as does research writing, use of students' own voices. Other disciplines also need frequent example, detail, or case study plotting, creative ideas, and creative development at the rewriting stage. There are a number of techniques for teaching and demonstrating use of creative writing methods in such written forms as newspaper writing, business and technical writing, public relations materials, and others.

Writing projects often should start in nonwriting classes with the same thing that they do in writing classes: brainstorming from oneself. Leone Scanlon, Clark University, says in "Play and Work—Creativity in Expository Writing," that "my first concern in designing the curriculum for the students was with their alienation from their writing. I wanted them to realize that although the emphasis on the self varies in different types of writing, all writing stems from the self and is shaped inevitably by the writer's point of view, taking life from the writer's spirit. In that sense, most writing is creative" (in Klaus and Jones 88).

And for that reason, most across-the-curriculum writing must come, no matter how technical the subject, in some way from students' selves.

One of the best ways to achieve writing "from the self" is to ask for expressive writing from students on a daily or weekly ungraded basis. This expressive

writing usually takes the form of some kind of journaling or free writing about the course, the class events, or the assignment.

Historian Priscilla Davidson suggests, in "Writing Across the Disciplines," several methods of using journaling or free writing:

> Informal, ungraded writing...allows students an opportunity for exploration and for making the mistakes that can be called to their attention before graded exercises...; it also frees the teacher from having to focus attention on finer points of discourse...in more formal assignments; and ...regular ungraded writing allows an instructor to see how the class is progressing. I would urge you to invite what Lou Kelly, the Writing Lab Director at the University of Iowa, calls "talking on paper," by calling for notes, outlines, even questions which would ordinarily be asked aloud. ...Other informal writing might include an occasional exercise which asks students to "talk" in writing about how materials for the class relate to their own experience. This, indeed, is what learning is all about.
>
> I suggest that students be asked to keep spiral notebook "journals" for the course. Not to be confused with diaries or logs, the journals could become the books in which informal, personal exercises for the class are kept. Exercises already recommended would belong there, along with notes and questions encountered as each student reads or writes at home. Encourage students to show you their journals and to address you directly in them whenever they are having problems or are thinking of questions. Encourage them—if it would be helpful—to write summaries of passages and to let you look them over. ...We would do well to insure that the writing is returned to students promptly...and...we might consider writing [our] responses, as this will underscore how much we value what we are asking students to do.
>
> ...*Writing in expressive forms [should] become an ongoing activity in any course at any level in any department* [emphasis hers]. ...Pre-writing—if a great deal of work in it can be done—inevitably has an astonishing effect upon students' more public, audience–directed prose. (Klaus and Jones 246-8).

In short, there are a variety of expressive, subjective, personal, and first-draft free-writing methods to bring to writing in other courses. Teachers who try these consistently often are surprised by the strength and power of these methods in teaching a curriculum.

Summary

The pedagogical assumption of this paper has been that creative writing is indeed a useful and vital tool in composition and other so-called "noncreative" courses. The theory behind this is that students need to find their own

voices, their own "personas," their own interest in their subjects. The actual practice of it involves a number of useful methods.

When teaching traditional developmental modes, one can use brainstorming or free writing. And once students are used to free writng, we can then add a slight formulaic push or direction in order to get them to free write in particular ways, e.g. a descriptive paper or a narration.

In teaching grammar, we may find that allowing students to find their own voices through free writing will help them use better grammatical structure because they will be writing using patterns they are used to, rather than trying to duplicate a technical or literary language which they are not used to. In addition, free writng will commit more of their interest to later grammatical rewriting. And finally, the chance to take writing through several stages will help them clarify their thinking—and resulting syntax—more easily.

Personal journaling uses creative expression for exploration, discovery, and risk-taking. Two methods for doing this are the technique of diving deep within oneself, and using plot to encourage or form storytelling.

Research and thesis writing may be used in such a way as to give students room to choose subjects which bring out their own voices.

Across-the-curriculum methods of using writng include many expressive, free-written, and or journaling techniques that are helpful for summarizing of learning, exploration and discovery of new or recently-learned techniques, focusing of attention, and clarification of thought. Consistent use of these can bring about surprising results.

In short, there are a variety of creative writing methods we can apply to other writing and nonwriting courses. Sometimes people already are using such methods, either as students or as teachers, and all that is needed is to identify what is going on and nudge it along further in appropriate directions. At other times, we need to convince other teachers that these methods will work. Perhaps the best way is to give other teachers hands-on methods, ask them to experiment, and discuss the results. Most of the research on writing says that with adjustments, creative writing methods are part of what most successful writers use in their writng process.

Bibliography

Berlin, James A., *Rhetoric and Reality—Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*, Conference on College Communication and Composition, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

Britton, James, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*, Schools Council Research Studies, National Council of Teachers of Education edition, MacMillan, 1975.

Elbow, Peter, *Writing With Power—Techniques For Mastering the Writing Process*, Oxford University Press, 1981.

Graves, Donald H., *Writing: Teachers & Children At Work*, Heinemann, 1983.

Klaus, Carl H. and Nancy Jones, *Courses For Change In Writing—A selection from the NEH/Iowa Institute*, Boynton/Cook, 1984.

Macrorie, Ken, *Uptaught*, Hayden, 1970.

Murray, Donald M., *A Writer Teaches Writing*, Second Edition, Houghton Mifflin, 1985.