The Best of the AWP Pedagogy Papers 2010

The Association of Writers and Writing Programs

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Pedagogy Team

Carmella Braniger, Millikin University

Emily Carr, University of Calgary

Emily Lundin, University of Freiburg

Frank Montesonti, National University

PREFACE.. 1

TRACY BOWLING • NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY • DRAMA • GRADUATE
Keeping Bodies in Mind: Transforming Dialogue into Dramatic Action.............................. 2

SARA E. CAMERON • PINE MANOR COLLEGE SOLSTICE MFA PROGRAM • GRADUATE • FICTION..
Exploding Reality: Exploring Use of First Person Present Tense in Narrative..................... 3

EMILY HOEFLINGER • TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY • ANY LEVEL• FICTION
Installment Writing: The Cell Phone Novel as Model for Crafting Fictional Moments...... 4

TONI JENSEN • UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA • FICTION • ANY LEVEL .
Genre in the Short Fiction Workshop: Shifting the Conversation.. 5

W. TODD KANEKO • GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY • UNDERGRADUATE • FICTION
Story Skins: One-Note Stories in Narrative Layers.. 6

MICHAEL P. KARDOS • MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY • ANY LEVEL • FICTION
Structural Imitation: The Greatest Form of Flattery.. 7

KATHRYN KRUSE & CHRISTOPHER SEELIE • UNLV • ANY LEVEL • FICTION
Playshop: Reworking Writing through Play, Collaboration and Drama 8

LESLIE LACHANCE • UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT MARTIN • UNDERGRADUATE • POETRY
Om Work: Collaborative Found Poems in Sanskrit Translitics... 9

BAKER LAWLEY • GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE • UNDERGRADUATE • FICTION
The Freedom of Rules: Using Weasels to Encourage Creativity... 10

BRENDA K. LEWIS • NORTHWEST MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY • UNDERGRADUATE • NONFICTION
From Personal Narrative to Personal Essay by Means of a Four-Step Process 11

BK LOREN-CECH • INTEGRATIVE WRITING INSTITUTE • UNDERGRADUATE/ GRADUATE • NONFICTION
Emotional Chronology: Sequence and Meaning in Memoir Structure................................ 12

MIKE MEGINNIS • NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY • ANY LEVEL • MULTIGENRE
The Pleasures of Reading: an Alternative to the Flaw-Oriented Workshop 13

LISA O'NEILL • UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA • UNDERGRADUATE • NONFICTION
Looking Outward Before Looking Inward: Writing the Acquired Experience Essay........14

MARY PINARD • BABSON COLLEGE • MULTI-LEVEL • POETRY
Surprising Reversals: Working With and Against Preference........15

COLIN RAFFERTY • UNIVERSITY OF MARY WASHINGTON • UNDERGRADUATE • NONFICTION
Small h, Big H: Students Writing About History Within Memoir........16

SCOTT SANDS • ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY • UNDERGRADUATE • MULTIGENRE
Forgery as Invention Strategy: De-Mystifying the Production of Belief........17

JORDAN SOYKA • LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY • UNDERGRADUATE • POETRY
Spooks in the Classroom: Using Ghost Oracles in Poetry Workshops........18

MARIANNE TAYLOR • KIRKWOOD COMMUNITY COLLEGE • UNDERGRADUATE • MULTIGENRE
Writing a Collaborative One-Act Through Character Development........19

VALERIE VOGRIN • SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY EDWARDSVILLE • FICTION • GRADUATE
The Invent-a-Form Assignment: An Antidote for Poet-Envy........20

ALLISON WILKINS • LYNCHBURG COLLEGE • UNDERGRADUATE • FICTION
Sharing Secrets: A PostSecret Exercise on Character Development........21

PREFACE

The AWP Pedagogy Forum celebrates the dedication of writing teachers by sharing and challenging the forms and theories of the art we practice. Every year the Pedagogy Forum Team looks forward to receiving and reading hundreds of papers on the pedagogical practices used in creative writing classroom across the nation and around the world. We are stimulated by the innovative and cutting-edge work writers do with other writers in the spirit of passing along traditions and making them new again. This year was no exception.

The 2010 Pedagogy Team is pleased to present this collection, *The Best of the AWP Pedagogy Papers 2010*. Engaged in pointing writers toward processes of creativity, the teachers here discuss the work they do every day in their classrooms. Issues relevant to students at all levels—from beginning writers to graduate students—are thoughtfully considered. Varied and innovative approaches to teaching the genres—from cell phone novel installment writing to translitic found poems to emotional chronology in memoir structure—appear side-by-side with more general suggestions for nurturing and developing the creative processes that lead to original work. The ideas and issues explored in this selection of papers reflect the ongoing innovative work AWP members perform in their classrooms. It is our hope that these ideas will inspire the pedagogical work of our members now and into the future.

The following collection evidences the Pedagogy Forum's vitality and recognizes some of our nation's best teachers of creative writing. With that said, the Forum's scope reaches beyond this selection. Each paper submitted and each participant in the roundtable discussions makes the Forum a success. Given the high quality of all of the papers submitted, selecting the twenty best for this publication was a difficult task. We are certain, though, that you will find this collection an enlightening variety of perspectives on cutting-edge pedagogical approaches for contemporary creative writing classrooms.

We would like to thank the following AWP board members and directors for their support of the Pedagogy Forums: Steve Heller, Richard Robbins, Kate Kysar, Matt Burriesci, and Christian Teresi. Most importantly, we thank the hundreds of teachers of writing who participate each year to make the Pedagogy Forum a reality. Together, we are a community of teachers and scholars engaged in the daunting, yet rewarding task of shaping the future of creative writing pedagogy in North America and beyond. We invite you to join us next year in Washington, where our lively discussions are sure to continue.

TRACY BOWLING • NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY • DRAMA • GRADUATE

Keeping Bodies in Mind: Transforming Dialogue into Dramatic Action

In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1982), Bakhtin discusses the novel as a form that, because of its peculiar structure and uniquely hybrid nature, "gets on poorly with other genres" (4). It is no wonder, then, that the writer of literary fiction faces great challenges when adapting his or her writing for the stage. While many of these challenges can be dealt with by discussing surface differences in form (fiction may provide description and interiority to characterize people and places, while stage plays rely on dialogue), a powerful shift in mindset must occur for fiction writers to apply their skills to drama. To successfully make this transition, students of fiction must learn to keep in mind the placement, movements, and interactions of physical bodies.

The student in fiction may already have developed habits, good and bad, regarding the use of the body in writing. It may therefore be useful to clarify that acknowledging the physical body in both fiction and drama means more than narrating subtle gestures and providing narrative stage directions. While such stage directions must certainly occur in a play, the writer must know that action in a play is only partially within the author's control; as Frank Dauster says in "Bridging the Quantum Gap: Considerations on the Novelist as Playwright" (*Latin American Theater Review*), a play is a "multi-logue between all those who intervene in any given production: actors, director, text and audience" (6). What the student playwright must start revolving in mind is the notion that dialogue (the author's primary contribution) must allow for and occasion movement (which the actor will provide). Dialogue must therefore create space in which movement can occur; in turn, these actions and reactions can accentuate, negate, or punctuate dialogue. Writers must be aware of how their dialogue can shut down or open up opportunities for movement.

To implement this framework, students need to both hear and envision their plays in performance. After a play has been read, the instructor can ask student "actors" to offer advice both about what actions they imagine their particular character performing as they spoke, as well as about how they imagine that character would physically behave while others are speaking. Some of the ideas generated from this conversation may be appropriate for the author to include in stage directions, while others will simply increase the author's awareness of which dialogues are enabling narrative movement (by portraying action and reaction) and which are preventing narrative movement (by keeping the characters idle).

As in any workshop setting, a few rules about writing pitfalls may begin to emerge. It is important to re-cast such rules as choices playwrights must make to best serve the physical performance. Subjectively, students may decide that long monologues should be avoided; however, evaluating long monologues within a physical performance framework reveals that the problem is again one of action and reaction. If one character is given the space to make an uninterrupted speech, the actions of other characters are limited. The other characters are cut off from disrupting the speaker and from doing anything that would produce a reaction from the speechgiver. This limits narrative movement and characterization. By framing the discussion this way, students will be free to analyze counterexamples of the "rules": what about monologues in *Hamlet*? What does Shakespeare do to negotiate issues of physical movement? By conducting the playwriting workshop within a framework of physical performance, the workshop model itself is served. Rather than offering advice based on preferences and subjective reactions, students will make an evaluation of the risks and rewards of various writing strategies, a skill that will enable them to perform at a high level across workshops and genres.

SARA E. CAMERON • PINE MANOR COLLEGE SOLSTICE MFA PROGRAM • GRADUATE • FICTION

Exploding Reality: Exploring Use of First Person Present Tense in Narrative

Much of the time of an undergraduate fiction writer is spent understanding the process of writing, and the tools to make fiction writing effective: story form, plot and structure; characterization; showing and telling; setting and atmosphere; narrative structure and point of view. It often takes more than a semester for a student to understand the nuts and bolts of the process before mastering them. While the complexity of point of view is analyzed and practiced in undergraduate classrooms, the graduate student often takes for granted that the level of writing calls, at times, for a deeper understanding of the narrative choice, something more than the attitude "it felt right."

One way to illuminate one's work is to experiment with point of view, including the use of tenses. First person present tense point-of-view is one of the more controversial narrative techniques. What does the narrative gain by closing the gap between reader and narrator? What does it lose? In "Fiction in the Present Tense" (*Textural Practice*, 2006), John Harvey suggests that "the effect of the present tense is to privilege a moment [. . .] to make it more visible and [. . .] to make it importantly slow" (79). He supports his theory by comparing the lush, vivid details of lyric poetry (that of T.S. Eliot, Milton, and Keats) to contemporary, present tense fiction, and determines that many of the novels are "carried by an energy that is primarily optical" (80). Harvey compares the present tense narrative to a "zoom lens" which features the ability of "draw[ing] us quickly closer to the action of the narrative, and of [drawing] the narrator closer to us." Further, he mentions the writer's need for the security of past tense writing and challenges writers thusly: "[Roland] Barthes implicitly recommends the dangerous exposure of the present tense, open to what he calls 'exploded reality,' in preference to the comfortable securities of the past tense [. . .] and it cannot be surprising that the present tense was heralded by a classic of Existentialism [*Writing Degree Zero*]—Existentialism being a movement much concerned with the anarchic pivotal instant of 'existence now'" (75).

The first person present tense can be suitable for a variety of narratives such as those for children or adolescents (who perceive everything in the now), those featuring characters with rich interior lives, or characters experiencing psychological stress or nervous breakdown. Even an action narrative can be written in the first person present tense, provided attention is given to structure, lest the writing sound like a screenplay.

By rewriting a passage in the first person present tense, an experiment that might feel initially uncomfortable (Barthes' dangerous moment of 'exploding reality'), the student gains surprising insight into the structure, character, and description of the piece. While committing to write in the first person present tense takes a certain amount of nerve, discipline and conviction, considering it, even for the time of the exercise, can give the student security and confidence in using this tense and provide sufficient insight to defend the chosen narrative, whatever it may be. Rather than to say "it felt right," the student will be able to understand *why* it felt right.

EMILY HOEFLINGER • TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY • ANY LEVEL• FICTION

Installment Writing: The Cell Phone Novel as Model for Crafting Fictional Moments

The cell-phone era has changed our interaction with media in the classroom on a number of levels. Most noticeably is the access both we, as instructors, and our students have to information and to literature through the IPhone and others like it. Unlike newspapers and magazines, cell phones now offer constant contact to information via the internet. Aside from the prevalent use for researching, thus far this technology seems to have not entered into the larger conversation of creative writing and its techniques. Yet, there's one recently emergent genre that speaks directly to creative writing as a craft: the Japanese "cell phone novel." A version of writing that is attributed mainly to women, though not exclusively, cell phone novels are similar to e-books but are distributed and downloaded in small chapter-like installments limited to between 75 and 100 words. This genre embodies the spirit of past conventional installment writing as well as today's contemporary technology, even if it does not mimic the length of pieces such as magazine essays and traditional novel chapters. In this sense, it offers installment writing a fresh face and forum.

In music, the small chunk of writing that an individual cell-phone novel chapter consists of would be commonly understood as a "phrase." This seems to be the best way of understanding each installment of the cell-phone novel. It's more than a single sentence, yet less than an essay or a traditionally written chapter. As a phrase, it is intended to stand on its own, but not to overwhelm the reader. It is a moment. Significant to this genre, and this phrasing, is the issue of time. The audience is not meant to download an entire book, but rather a small section of writing that can be read on a lunch break or in the subway. At the same time, each entry, or chapter, must bring the reader back for more. Within the writing classroom, cell-phone novel exercises can be used as a way of capturing phrasing within writing. Similar to the rigors of form poetry, it presents tight restrictions in hopes of heightening the possibilities of the writing. For writing students, it is at once a method for crafting the perfect moment in a few tight sentences and an exercise keeping in mind the plot and movement of a larger work.

The proposed is an introductory assignment for a fiction-writing course. This assignment, given within the first two weeks of the semester, is meant to span the length of the course, challenging students to focus on a major writing concept for approximately a 12-week period of time. As a warm up, students are introduced to the Hemingway "six word memoir," the notion that an entire story can be told in six words. They are asked to brainstorm three to five different six word memoirs or stories, which are then shared with the entire class or, if class size or course level demands, can be presented to smaller subgroups before bringing the work to the entire class. Ultimately, the intention is twofold: supporting community building within the classroom as well as introducing students to workshop critique, as students will be asked to help their fellow classmates choose one or two stories. The in-class activity ends with a ten-minute free write where students have the opportunity to expand on one or two of their stories.

The next level of the course moves to a wiki, which serves as the cell-phone. Students are required to post their 75-100 word installments on a weekly basis, similar to a journal. Likewise, fellow classmates are required to follow along weekly, posting critiques directly to the wiki and/or incorporating discussions of the progress within the real time classroom. As cell-phone novels are now being converted into full novel-length works, at the end of the semester students are required to revise, from in-class and wiki-based critiques, and bind their "novels" for final portfolio, turning in all earlier drafts as well as their finished copies.

TONI JENSEN • UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA • FICTION • ANY LEVEL

Genre in the Short Fiction Workshop: Shifting the Conversation

Most pedagogy written about genre fiction centers around one point of debate: to allow or to disallow genre stories into writing workshops. One side argues that allowing genre writing—horror, science fiction, fantasy, Westerns—into an academic setting degrades the workshop, and results in plot-driven stories with thin characterization. The other side argues genre stories, with their attention to strong plot and conflict, have much to offer the world of character-driven, slow-paced, literary stories.

Though this debate is interesting—albeit somewhat reductive, it eschews practicality and reality in the writing workshop: many students want to write literary stories and many also prefer to work in genre. Even when genre is disallowed, it often works its way in through the back door under the guise of *magical realism* or *speculative fiction.* Even when literary fiction is pushed to the background, students who want to write emotional realism will do so—they'll just set these stories on Mars or make their characters elves.

The exercise outlined below proposes to shift the conversation from "allowing vs. disallowing" toward, specifically, how requiring students to write stories that qualify as both literary and "genre" benefits everyone—most of all, the student writer.

First, before workshop begins, assign both literary and genre stories as models. This is important since many students who want to write genre fiction have only ever read genre novels, so their short stories read like the world's shortest novels—too crammed full of plot details for much character development or meaningful description to emerge.

Next, the semester's assignments should call for students to write two stories: one literary and one genre. Both stories should be workshopped, so that neither can be considered a "throw-away." The assignment has a few tricks to strengthen students' writing by helping them see both the commonalities between these types, as well as the pitfalls specific to each.

Trick One:

The two stories must have a character in common, but if the genre piece is, say, a space Western and the literary piece is a suburban drama, the housewife can morf into the ship's captain; she just must retain enough essential traits to be recognizable as the same character.

Trick Two:

The genre story must employ an atypical or "experimental" form, and the literary piece must contain a strong plot arc.

Requiring the students to create overlapping characters means the students who favor literary fiction will have more investment in their genre pieces, and the genre enthusiasts will have at least one well-developed character in each piece. The literary stories should be reinvigorated by stronger story arcs, and the genre pieces reconceived through their strange, new forms.

Because the assignment addresses strengths and weaknesses in both genre and literary fiction, students ultimately have a greater appreciation for the constraints and possibilities of both types of writing.

W. TODD KANEKO • GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY • UNDERGRADUATE • FICTION

Story Skins: One-Note Stories in Narrative Layers

Young writers are often so in love with the melodrama that they believe drives their stories, they are unwilling to undertake more literary fare. A young women catches her boyfriend cheating, a notorious gangster is toppled by an ingenious undercover cop, and don't forget that ninth level Barbarian Warrior who slays the Dragon of Shadowdark Swamp with his magic axe—these one-note stories get mired in their singular action, because often it's that melodrama that attracts young writers to writing in the first place. They don't want to be told not to write these stories; they can't see the rut they are in. They don't understand why their stories can't be straight plot like that episode of *Law & Order* they saw on television last night.

In his book, *Making Shapely Fiction*, Jerome Stern notes that in many stories, "situations take place inside situations that are within larger situations. Your characters are caught in layers of layers" (30). The Story Skins assignment offers the young writer a way to keep the melodrama by giving it additional value through narrative distance. The assignment prompt goes like this:

Write a story about something real or not real that has happened to you. Don't shy away from melodrama—you got drunk and flirted shamelessly with that boy, while your husband watched from across the room. You went sledding with your girlfriend, and she died when you slammed headfirst into that humongous Oak at the bottom of the big hill. You were out hiking with friends when Bigfoot jumped out of the bushes and stole your beef jerky. This part of the assignment is what I will call the "first skin."

Then, write a story, the "second skin." Make it a simple scene with two or more people that is not an extension or prelude to the first skin. It might be a dinner party, a job interview, or whatever device you want to bring your people together. During this scene, which has nothing to do with the first skin, the story from the first skin emerges from another character's mouth or actions. The effect might be a "first skin" story told within the "second skin" story. It might be a first skin story that happens alongside the second skin. Our aim is a story that presents melodrama packaged inside something else. In this sense, the story is like an onion as one layer of story is peeled back to reveal another.

A successful Story Skins creation uses layers to create narrative distance from the melodrama in question. In his book, *Shaping the Story*, Mark Baechtel notes, "in stories that are narratively distant, the reader often gains access to the story's action and characters through the agency of the story's informing intelligence." Story Skins allows the young writer to take advantage of this by presenting first skin melodrama that is interpreted through second skin characters. Emphasis shifts from the melodrama itself to the way it ripples through the lives of others. Instead of centering on the girl who watches her boyfriend cheating on her, the second skin might divert us to a zookeeper's last day on the job as he listens to her story while she helps him tend to a sick lion. Instead of focusing on that gangster's fall in a hail of gunfire, we also get to consider the young lady who hears about it from the gangster's estranged grandson as he fills out his unemployment forms. The barbarian might be a lost cause, but we won't know until we see him years later through the eyes of his twelve-year-old niece at the barbarian family reunion. The goal here is to allow students to indulge in the melodramas that interest them, and then to show them how adding more story gives greater value to the actions of their plots, to help them differentiate plot from story and create stories with more sophisticated narrative structures.

MICHAEL P. KARDOS • MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY • ANY LEVEL • FICTION

Structural Imitation: The Greatest Form of Flattery

While students are often quick to learn many of the basic principles of writing short stories—the importance of relevant detail, techniques of vivid scene-writing, effective characterization, use of dialogue—many have a harder time learning to shape an entire story. Often, the student story begins with promise but then loses focus; it becomes increasingly unclear why it is organized the way that it is, or why the student has decided to include a particular scene or section. In short, what apprentice fiction writers often need once they've mastered some of the basics of craft is a way to study and internalize story structure—to learn why one section of a story follows the previous one, and how it leads to the next, and how all those sections somehow work to create a complete and satisfying whole. This is where the imitation exercise comes into play.

In fiction, when we think about the literary imitation, we usually think about the homage, a sort of stylistic or thematic nod to a major writer. Here, however, we're talking instead about a *structural* imitation. The idea is for the student to study a published short story and discover the function of each section. Then the student is to write an original story, with his or her unique characters, plot, and voice, but one in which each section of the story serves the same structural purpose as in the original.

To introduce the assignment, I have the class read a relatively short story with clearly identifiable sections, like "Water Liars" by Barry Hannah. This three-page story is told in eight brief sections. The class's job is to describe each section according to its function in the story, using accurate yet broad language. For instance:

Section 1 describes the place where the characters habitually gather, and the history of that place;

Section 2 is a flashback that describes the conflict between the narrator and another character (in this story, his wife) that has led the narrator to go to the place described in Section 1;

Section 3 is an attempt by the narrator to describe why he feels the way he feels about the conflict presented in Section 2—that is, why he is feeling so tortured, even though he realizes that his feelings might be unreasonable;

And so on. After working through all eight sections, students are tasked with choosing a story from the course reading list and composing a section-by-section structural analysis of that story as described above. Then, over the next couple of weeks, they are to use that same structure to write an original story. The student's story can be considerably longer or shorter than the original; the only requirement is that it follow the same section-by-section structure.

I have found this exercise to be invaluable in helping students to teach themselves about organizing a story into a compelling whole. It gives them a new way to read fiction, and it gives them confidence that their own stories, on which they work so hard, will be built on a solid foundation.

KATHRYN KRUSE & CHRISTOPHER SEELIE • UNLV • ANY LEVEL • FICTION

Playshop: Reworking Writing through Play, Collaboration and Drama

Workshops offer writers the opportunity to come out from behind their computer screens and notebooks to discuss creative endeavors with peers. Ideally, a workshop should leave its members full of ideas for change and improvement to their work as well as enthusiasm to continue writing. "Playshop" attains these goals by creating a space that fosters such enthusiasm by using play and collaboration as critique.

The members of a Playshop should understand a few guidelines to ensure a successful session. Because Playshop revises through physical representation and integration of other artistic disciplines, the call to criticize is meted out by relieving the group of individual ownership and reactive critical roles. The players must be willing to collectively own the story, so that the onus of authorship is temporarily withheld. By committing to play, all members are responsible for the direction a story takes, and each must be flexible to amending that vision.

After a space has been designated the "stage," the group does a warm-up exercise: one of a number of improv theatre games to get everyone comfortable with moving around, interacting and speaking spontaneously. Everyone should have read the story in advance and be willing to discuss it for the purposes of play. Then the writer decides which playshop games to use with the story. Suggestions from the rest of the class are welcome, and the writer is free to share concerns or intentions to get suggestions from the other members, if so desired. Each game can be played several times or just once.

All playshop games are based on improv theatre games, adapted to assist in critiquing fiction writing. They are to remain spontaneous and responsive to the needs of the submitted story, but here are some examples:

Tell the story short: In smaller groups, members act out the story in sixty seconds, then thirty seconds, then fifteen. This game reduces a story to its most vivid, physical and/or visual moments. The game can be continued by having the groups advance the story beyond its initial ending.

Jury/Jerry: Using various settings (court scene, talk show, etc.), members become the characters from the story to be interviewed and interact with each other within a setting that has already prescribed rituals of behavior, and is detached from the original story.

Object lesson: Objects from the story are given emphasis on the stage by acting out a scene from the story in which these objects are critical. Players can alter the meaning or placement of the objects in the setting in order to keep the drama going.

Cut up and dialogue: Members cut out lines from the story that they find especially evocative and put them in a hat. Two players pull a line each and must act out a scene where one line begins the scene and the other ends it. A variation is:

Up the anti: Characters are put in a scene and then, as the action moves, other players can shout out new hardships that they must deal with.

During play, the writer observes the games with a critical eye. By watching for the way players compensate for gaps or weaknesses, reinterpret characters, and make a travesty of the plot, the writer may discover aspects of the story that no one would consciously critique. A unique attribute of playshop is that it works well with stories in any stage of development, be it the beginning of an idea or a more polished piece. These games can be generative or editorial, depending on how the writer analyzes and uses the playful experiments.

LESLIE LACHANCE • UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT MARTIN • UNDERGRADUATE • POETRY

Om Work: Collaborative Found Poems in Sanskrit Translitics

In North America, we often use poems composed in Western European languages as the basis for exercises in the translitic: a "translation" derived from an approximation of syntax, sounds and cognates rather than from any true semantic or grammatical sense of the original text. This approach can yield delightful and clever found poems. Because many North Americans have some passing acquaintance with the syllables, grammar and cognates of European languages, in creating the translitic we are able to manage a degree of creative risk tempered by a faint sense of familiarity with the source text. To invoke T.S. Eliot and S.T. Coleridge, in working out a translitic we are making the familiar strange and the strange familiar.

For students who are ready to venture farther afield in bilingual word play, Sanskrit texts can provide another kind of challenge when used as the basis for a translitic exercise. Typically, because Sanskrit rarely appears in North American language curricula outside of divinity or yoga schools, the average poetry student likely will be unfamiliar with its sounds and patterns, even in a Romanized form. Thus, with the source text territory less certain, a student's approximations in the translitic will need to be a bit more inventive than they might be with the more familiar combinations of sounds and grammatical patterns of European languages.

As a warm-up for the Sanskrit translitic, it can be useful to assign as homework the more conventional European language translitic exercise first. After sharing and discussing the results of the exercise in the next class period, I present students with note cards featuring selections of verses in Romanized Sanskrit from the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. A good source for these texts is the Sri Swami Satchidananda translation available from Integral Yoga Publications. It provides the actual Sanskrit script paired with a Romanized syllabic rendering along with the translation. The book also includes a pronunciation guide. Sharing a few actual translations can help give students a feel for the Sutras' aphoristic qualities. Samples of other aphoristic writing, such as excerpts from William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* or Oscar Wilde's satiric aphorisms, can also give students a sense of the range of possible voices for their own texts. Students work individually for a portion of the class session, developing their own translitic aphorisms from the Sanskrit texts. Then, working in groups of three or four, students can combine and shape their translitic aphorisms into extended meditations. In considering the final product, this exercise can also challenge students by asking that their work make "sense" on some level, whether it be syntactically, thematically, imagistically, or in some other way.

As with any translitic work, this exercise allows students to experiment playfully with conventional linguistic boundaries, and to discover new territories between them.

BAKER LAWLEY • GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE • UNDERGRADUATE • FICTION

The Freedom of Rules: Using Weasels to Encourage Creativity

Students in undergraduate creative writing courses can at times struggle with the "creative" element of the work in the course. They perhaps feel addled, enrolled in a class granting imaginative freedom amid the concrete measurements of lectures and memorization and tests in other courses. They hand in assignments with caveats like "I hope I did this right," or "Is this what you wanted?"

But when an instructor rails against this creative timidity, it seems to only make it worse. Pleading for creativity and begging students to take risks on the page increases the pressure they feel from this freedom. Removing restrictions and opening exercises to vast interpretation can often paralyze beginning writers.

One way to deal with their hesitancy and increase the creativity students feel willing to express is to meet students where they are. The solution is to ADD rules to exercises and assignments.

These are not real rules—they are arbitrary, haphazard, maybe even spontaneous. The rules should be concrete but also flexible—they need to allow students to approach the assignment from many different tones, dictions, and voices. Students should have space to apply them in whatever way most aids their creativity.

Sample ways of using extra rules: for an exercise in describing a setting in concrete detail, add a rule that it should be raining; for an exercise in writing realistic dialogue, add a rule that the characters must use the words "fourteen" and "coffee;" for an exercise in opening sentences of short stories, add a rule that the first sentence must use a noun as a verb, such as "monkey" or "wheel."

John Gardner, in his assignments in *The Art of Fiction*, makes use of these concrete details as a starting point: "Describe a lake as seen by a character who has just committed murder. Do not mention the murder."

The rules are beside the point, of course, for the aims of the exercise. Essentially these rules give the students an initial concrete detail, which can then nudge them to start writing creatively in a way that more open freedom does not. By giving one detail to work from, students have a foundation from which to be creative, and those more tentative in their creativity feel secure that they are doing the assignment asked of them.

This approach to assignments is a cousin to Robert Frost's notion that "Writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net." The more restrictions put on a writer, the more creative she must be to write around and among them. The proof that these additions of rules work to inspire students can be seen in the enormous variety of interpretations a class comes up with from the same initial detail.

As the semester progresses, these rules can become the common property of the classroom—teachers can make them up spontaneously, or can request student suggestions for extra rules. In one case, a student suggestion, "Use the word 'weasel' as a verb," ended up giving the nickname "Weasels" to these kinds of rules, as the concrete elements in the assignments weasel their way into the fiction.

BRENDA K. LEWIS • NORTHWEST MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY • UNDERGRADUATE • NONFICTION

From Personal Narrative to Personal Essay by Means of a Four-Step Process

Two related challenges a novice practitioner of the personal essay faces are: 1) the transition from straight narrative to exploration/examination of meaning (or at least significance); and 2) the concept of making the personal universal. The first challenge requires the ability to look past *what happened* to *what does it mean* (or why is it significant), while the second challenge requires the ability to look past the immediate "I" to the potential "we." In keeping with the writer's maxim "show, don't tell" (tired and trite as it may be), the best pedagogical approach to overcoming these challenges is a process of writing practices that build upon one another, taking the novice writer step-by-step from the personally comfortable zone of the narrative to the intellectually rigorous zone of the essay.

In a four-part portfolio assignment inspired by Laura Wexler's essay "Saying Good-bye to 'Once Upon a Time,' or Implementing Postmodernism in Creative Nonfiction" and Michael Pearson's essay "Research Your Own Life," both published in *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, edited by Carolyn Forche and Philip Gerard, first-year writing students begin by recalling a significant incident or event from their past, one that involved or was witnessed by another person who can be contacted today, and writing an account of that incident or event. The assignment is to "write a personal essay" centered on that incident or event, but what invariably results is straight narrative; these "essays" are the first element in the students' portfolios.

The students are then required to contact their compatriots or witnesses and interview them, as objectively as possible, about their memories of the same incidents/events, and the results of these interviews are written up in (theoretically) objective summary documents, a copy of which is added to the portfolios. The third part of the process is to take that interview and compare/contrast the witness's account with the writer's account, taking note of where the accounts are similar, where they are different and speculating upon what might account for these similarities and differences. This process, too, results in a piece of writing that becomes part of the unit portfolio.

The fourth, final, and most difficult (complex) step of the assignment, in which the move is made from the solipsism of the personal narrative to the universalism of the personal essay, is to synthesize (or braid) the three previous documents into an essay that explores not the memory of the event itself, and not the contrasts/similarities in each account, but *the significance of* those contrasts and similarities and what their findings have to say in general about memory, and perspective, and how "we" interpret and create meaning.

BK LOREN-CECH • INTEGRATIVE WRITING INSTITUTE • UNDERGRADUATE/ GRADUATE • NONFICTION

Emotional Chronology: Sequence and Meaning in Memoir Structure

One of the most challenging aspects of teaching memoir is to rid an aspiring writer of the notion of chronological sequencing. Too many beginning memoirs plod along, relying on the weak and tedious structure of "this happened, and then this happened next," and so on, until the merciful last line finally hits the page. Phew! Done. The teacher sets the pages down and moves on to the next set of student pages.

Asking student writers to break up chronology is a little like asking them to rearrange numbers of a digital clock. "People will get lost," they'll say. They'll tell you all their characters will be late for appointments, and without chronological sequencing, how can a memoir be *true*, and how can it move forward? There's no future and no past.

Introducing students to the notion of "emotional chronology" is one way to begin to nudge them into the possibility that Einstein was right: time is not linear, and neither is a good storyline. The term "emotional chronology" gives them a form to play with, something concrete.

Emotional chronology asks the students to organize a story based on what a reader needs to know *emotionally* in any given scene; not what the reader needs to know incidentally.

One exercise that invites students to explore emotional chronology is this:

Ask students to write a scene of their lives that holds tremendous poignancy for them.

When the scene is complete, ask them to re-read it and to recognize the emotion that pervades the scene.

Then ask them to write another poignant scene from their lives that took place at a time very different from the previous scene, but which evokes the same emotion.

When they have written these two scenes, ask them to write a story using these two scenes as seminal moments in the storyline, and allow the unconnected, a-chronological scenes to remain in direct sequence. Invite them to resist the urge toward any explanation of the why the two scenes sit side by side. They can use a double space to indicate the time switch, but they cannot explain the shift. Let them see how one seemingly unconnected scene can inform another scene, if the emotional content of the two scenes are connected.

An image that works in tandem with the notion of emotional chronology is the constellation. When we look up at the night sky, we see a series of unconnected dots. Yet mythology—perhaps the most enduring form of storytelling— was born of out connecting those dots into constellations, into stories. The magic of mythology, and the magic of emotional chronology, is that they both allow the reader to participate: to connect the dots. This makes for a richer reading experience.

MIKE MEGINNIS • NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY • ANY LEVEL • MULTIGENRE

The Pleasures of Reading: an Alternative to the Flaw-Oriented Workshop

In her article "Voice of Authority: Theorizing Creative Writing Pedagogy," Rosalie Morales Kearns argues that the traditional workshop structure tends to create normative and flaw-oriented conversations around student work. A failure to name what the workshop values can lead to confusion on the part of student writers, who cannot be expected to understand what they are "doing wrong" if they do not know what it means to be "right." It can also privilege an unduly narrow set of aesthetic and narratological preferences, as that which goes unnamed need never defend itself.

Kearns suggests a number of solutions to these and other problems, including relaxing the "gag rule" that requires student authors to remain silent during discussion of their work, discussion of published stories, and the use of writing exercises. Creative writing instructors might also approach these concerns by explicitly naming, at the outset of any workshop, the pleasures of reading. Such pleasures are, of course, countless, but there are broader categories likely to be named by most readers: the pleasures of beautiful language, imagery, character, emotional movement, structure, interpersonal connection, mystery, and surprise, among others.

The infinite variety of pleasures available to writers and readers creates an opportunity for students to collaborate in their workshop's definition of aesthetic and narratological success. As J.A. Held argues in "Making Writing Assessment Meaningful," when students participate in the creation of classroom standards, they better understand feedback and often "buy in" to those standards rather than rejecting them as merely the esoteric opinions of one reader. In the graduate workshop, students are additionally able to help in setting the agenda for future discussion. Student writers who want to be sure their needs will be addressed may propose pleasures that align with their goals, thus providing instructors and classmates with a critical vocabulary that will eventually serve their particular needs.

As this initial discussion defining various pleasures of reading takes place, the instructor should take extensive notes, in preparation for writing a hand-out. This hand-out might be organized hierarchically to some extent, with broader categories (character, plot, and language, for instance) being broken down into more specific categories. Students should be required to refer to this list regularly throughout the class. The list should also be allowed to grow as new pleasures are discovered and introduced into classroom conversation.

This exercise will create opportunities for workshop conversations that are simultaneously less flaw-oriented and more genuinely critical. Instructors might begin the workshop by asking, "What pleasures do we feel in reading this piece?" This should lead not only to a description of what the workshop likes, but how and why particular aspects of the text are working. Rather than asking what the student has done poorly, the instructor should ask students how these pleasures might be intensified and how other pleasures might be introduced to complement those already represented on the page. This explicit framing of the workshop as a discussion about how to build on existing strengths will require the workshop to praise more often, but also with more rigor, as every discussion of a weakness will be phrased in terms of an existing success (the pleasures of the text) and potential for future success (how the writer might build on those pleasures).

LISA O'NEILL • UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA • UNDERGRADUATE • NONFICTION

Looking Outward Before Looking Inward: Writing the Acquired Experience Essay

When called upon to author their first essay, beginning nonfiction students oftentimes try to locate the pieces of their life story that feel most dramatic, most traumatic or most painful. While their impulse to locate tension and meaning in their experiences is a good one, they also tend to pick experiences that they have not dealt with emotionally and are thus unable to maintain narrative distance from. And in picking experiences, such as the death of a loved one or issues with substance abuse or eating disorders, that are already laden with drama, they set themselves up to overwrite.

One solution to this problem is to encourage students to extend and expand their gaze. Students can be sent out into a foreign experience to gain new knowledge and insights into their own perceptions of the world. At the heart of the engaging personal essay lies the reader's act of bearing witness to the narrator's mind at work. In seeing the narrator wrestle with difficult ideas and questions, the reader begins to know more about the storyteller and to feel connected with the story.

For the Acquired Experience Essay, nonfiction students are asked to do something they have never done before or to participate in an activity (non-dangerous and legal) that puts them outside of the comfort zone of their normal day-to-day activities. Students have written about attending a religious service that is at odds with their own belief system, going to their first baseball game, doing laundry at a Laundromat, taking themselves out for dinner and a movie alone, attending a political rally, and participating in drag queen bingo night. In acquiring experiences they have never had before, these young writers are forced to acknowledge and oftentimes challenge their current belief systems, ways of thinking, and perceptions of the world. What results is interesting writing that uses the outside world as a stimulant for their intellectual and emotional reactions.

In addition to giving them engaging material for their initial writing, this assignment also allows students insights into what it means to do research for their creative work. They become more comfortable with talking to people they don't know, with going places they would not normally visit, and most importantly, with seeing the location of their temporary discomfort as an ideal place to write from. For in this place of unfamiliarity, their observations are keener. They notice the characters of this place—their mannerisms, what they are wearing, what they are saying, who they are talking to. They notice the missing patches of floral wallpaper, tinged with cigarette smoke, at a stranger's home or the leftover décor from the 1970s at a dentist's office. On an initial trip to the Laundromat, a student observes her own reluctance to leave her clothing while it washes, and the experience results in a meditative essay on many people's connection to material things and how these things connect to their sense of identity. A student, attending his first baseball game, smells the hot dogs at the grandstand and is reminded of backyard barbeques at his childhood home; he wonders why his dad, a huge Mets fan, never took him to a game. The student decides to call and ask him about that.

Writer Sydney Smith said, "A great deal of talent is lost to the world for want of a little courage." The Acquired Experience Essay encourages student writers to look beyond their familiar physical and emotional landscapes and to consider every new place and experience as potential source material for their writing. In doing so, they realize that they have much to learn, much to say, and little to fear.

Surprising Reversals: Working With and Against Preference

All student poets develop preferences regarding their own poems. How they make them and with what tools—style, form, even subject and theme—are, at least in part, matters of judgment. Formed by practice, experience, influence, and often by accident, preferences like these reflect the poet who holds them. To know one's preferences is to know (at least something about) oneself.

Creating opportunities for students to identify and study their preferences through exploration and analysis deepens their grasp of technique and builds confidence. Asking students to reverse their preferences—or to work against them—is a much more disruptive, even radical exercise, but one that can be revelatory and transformative. It can also be a valuable (and jarring) corrective for those students whose preferences have become so ingrained that they believe they are skills and not choices. This kind of narrow thinking permits them not to (want to) try fresh approaches to process or to attempt new styles and techniques, thus limiting their growth, range, and openness to experimentation. This assignment embraces preference, but also challenges it. It works best midway through a term, since it must draw on what the students have been learning and allow enough time for them to stretch toward new awareness and facility.

Part 1: Design a checklist with categories (these may be modified depending on your course/genre focus). For poets, it might look something like this:

Categories of Poems: Lyric / Narrative
Open/Closed Forms: sonnet / villanelle / sestina / elegy / free verse / pantoum
Techniques: end rhyme / anaphora / slant rhyme / simile / 3rd person / 1st person
Poet Models: Whitman / Dickinson / Doty / Clifton (selected from class readings)
Subjects: politics / science / crime / family history / food / war / art / relationships

Distribute two copies of the list in class, asking students to fill out both. Collect one copy for yourself, and then engage students in a discussion of the preferences they chose (This is a great opportunity to be sure everyone understands the categories, forms, and techniques on the list.) and how those preferences developed. For the next class, ask stduents to write a poem that uses some of their chosen preferences; they should be prepared to read their preference poem out loud and briefly discuss how it reflects their preferences.

Part 2: In the meantime and before the next class, review students' preference checklists and based on these, make a new list of anti-preferences for each. After students have read and discussed their preference poems during the next class, distribute the anti-preference lists. After a brief discussion of preference as choice, ask them to write a new poem that chooses against preference using their revised list. Repeat the readings and discussion for that next class. This part of the assignment will undoubtedly be met with much surprise, even dismay, but results are doubly rewarding since students discover more range in trying previously untried form, technique, influence, and subject matter, and surprise themselves by crafting poems they never imagined they could or would.

COLIN RAFFERTY • UNIVERSITY OF MARY WASHINGTON • UNDERGRADUATE • NONFICTION

Small h, Big H: Students Writing About History Within Memoir

One of the first pitfalls of introducing students to creative nonfiction is moving them past the point of solipsism; how do we as teachers get them not only to see the world beyond their own selves, but also to recognize their own unique perspective in this world? How can we show them that nonfiction is not simply egotistical navel-gazing, but instead a tool for making order and sense of the world's complexity? This exercise seeks to develop students' understandings of the wealth of possibility in creative nonfiction (and specifically, memoir) and the genre's focus on the author's self.

The assignment begins with class discussion of Robin Hemley's essay "Reading History to My Mother," a memoir piece about Hemley's mother, the writers she worked with at Yaddo, and, in a cameo, Moe Howard (of Three Stooges fame). The essay provides the students with a model for their own out-of-class assignment.

In this out-of-class assignment, students are directed to write a short 2-3 page essay about themselves in history. Class discussion revolves around the idea of "small h" history—the personal histories of individuals—and "big H" History—the national and global forces that happen around us, seemingly beyond our control and often without our participation. (Instructors may find it useful to put a few limitations on possible topics; since I teach at a school in Virginia, I don't allow my students to use the Virginia Tech shootings or September 11th as subjects.) Most importantly, the students are instructed to focus on their own participation in whatever historical event they write about, and not to merely recount the event (this is a nice place, too, to emphasize the difference between standard nonfiction and creative nonfiction).

Students return to the classroom with essays on a wide variety of topics—everything from seeing Obama on the campaign trail to meeting Lisa Nowak, the astronaut who drove 1,000 miles to confront a romantic rival. A few volunteer (or are called on) to read theirs in class, with casual discussion following. I make sure to make a few points in these discussions:

- Creative nonfiction works well when it features narrative.
- Creative nonfiction works well when it connects to a larger idea—as Dinty W. Moore puts it, a "discovery" on the part of the author or reader.
- Creative nonfiction works well when the author has a personal stake in his or her subject.

Through these discussions, students see how the story of seeing Obama can, through its focus on the author's experience, become a vehicle for ruminating on the ideas of democracy and youth. They see how the story of meeting an astronaut before she becomes infamous for an attempted kidnapping can be a means for discussing the idea of heroes. They see how both essays work through narrative, and finally, they see the importance of their own experiences within the greater narrative of History.

By exploring the intersection of "small h" history and "big H" history, students begin to learn the power of creative nonfiction to situate themselves in the world around them, as well as to see their worth of their own memoirs.

SCOTT SANDS • ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY • UNDERGRADUATE • MULTIGENRE

Forgery as Invention Strategy: De-Mystifying the Production of Belief

One of the myths at the heart of the creative enterprise is that of the creative writer as genius, as a sort of alchemist or magician who mysteriously speaks into existence something never seen before. To disabuse creative writing students—especially young students new to the craft—of the notion that inspiration simply floats down from above, anointing the worthy, can be a difficult task for any teacher. That writing might require study and work, that concepts like "beauty" and the "well-crafted" artifact can only be achieved by witnessing art and making art—in short, through practice—is a lesson that many young writers are at pains to learn.

Cases in plagiarism and forgery—from the recent plagiarism case of Harvard student and erstwhile "novelist" Kaavya Viswanathan to that of 18th-century Shakespearean forger William Henry Ireland—affirm the long-standing importance of intellectual property in Western European culture. But such cases can do more than provide motivation to the creative writer to "do your own work, or else." By constructing assignments that specifically interrogate the way texts come to be valued and engage head-on taboo-laden ideas of plagiarism, forgery, and intellectual property, creative writing teachers can teach students to practice and develop skills in critical reading and writing. One such assignment involves the group forging of a "lost" creative work by a known writer.

In step one of this assignment, students in small groups are given or select an author to research and read several of that writer's creative works, his or her correspondence, his or her biographical information, and even the writing of his or her contemporaries. Through careful, critical reading, the writers in each group become "experts" in that writer's use of language and learn more about the context within which he or she lived and wrote. In step two, the members of the group settle on a "lost" work to forge—a poem, play, or other artistic work, the drafting and revising of which will allow them to use their new understanding of the writer's use of technique and sense of craft. In step three, each member of the group creates an "artifact" that suggests the legitimacy of the forged document—a letter between the writer and a close friend, or a long-lost playbill announcing the drama's cancelled premiere. In step four, the group works together, using the created artifacts along with their understanding of the writer and his or her use of technique, to create the "lost" work itself. Finally, each group presents the work to the class as though they were a team of "experts" asserting the legitimacy of the text in question.

Careful reading, good writing habits, and attention to craft can be taught in many ways. Why teach them in the context of "dishonest" practices like forgery and plagiarism? The simple answer might be to demystify taboo subjects like the idea of author as genius and of literature as property and to foreground the idea that artworks are real things that exist in the world and have a real purpose. And certainly, such an assignment opens up the way for discussions of concepts like plagiarism and forgery, while still focusing on the development of critical reading and the honing of skills of craft. But the more complex answer is that approaching artworks as real things and acknowledging that art has power to change the apprehension of the world can, in the words of Viktor Shklovsky, "make the stone *stony*."

JORDAN SOYKA • LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY • UNDERGRADUATE • POETRY

Spooks in the Classroom: Using Ghost Oracles in Poetry Workshops

What most beginning poets need is a good jostling—something to frighten them away from echoes of Hallmark verse and the rigid strictures of their own thoughts. And what better way to achieve such agitation than to haunt your students with the ghost of an infamous poet?

The basic idea of ghost oracles was introduced to me in a class taught by Andrei Codrescu, and I've expanded on it in my own teaching. The process is simple—assign a ghost companion to each of your students and have them buy at least one of the author's books (preferably a fat one). If you'd like to play matchmaker, you can find an author that suits the aesthetic of every student, but random ghosts are acceptable. Once the students have familiarized themselves with the poet's life and writing, the oracular work can begin; tell your students to begin consulting their ghost about everything—not only what they should write about, but what they should eat, who they should vote for, and where they can find their missing sock. Answers are derived by asking the question aloud, flipping to a random page with eyes averted, and pointing. Whatever line(s) your finger lands on is the ghost's response. Creative interpretation of the ghost's answers is encouraged; logical analysis, however, is not. Moreover, all answers are set in stone—no do-overs.

Ghost companions are an excellent way to teach students that good writing comes out of careful reading. Most undergraduates have been exposed to very little contemporary poetry; assigning ghost companions (note—the "ghost" need not be dead) not only ensures that students are reading recent poetry, but also teaches them to read in a way that is *generative* toward their own work. In the spirit of Eliot's advice that "mature poets steal," encourage students to work their oracular conversations into their own writing (with proper citation). We all imitate the writing we love; by making it a conscious and deliberate process, students will become more aware of their own voices, as well as alternative avenues of poetic exploration.

Indeed, the fragmentary, often baffling answers the ghost oracles provide encourages experimentation. Students find themselves focusing more on the texture of words and their multifaceted meanings; they find themselves drawn toward (and imitating) lines that look and sound interesting. In other words, they find themselves mucking around in the medium of language. This focus on words before meaning collapses the sterile distance of bad poetry in which students try to *explain* rather than *express*.

Furthermore, the ghost oracle places an emphasis on chance that is often overlooked in the workshop setting. The randomness of the ghost oracle's responses teach students that while hard work and revision are essential to a poem, the accidental or unintended phrase can often have a freshness that cannot be wrought. In our focus on revision, we forget to tell students that our best lines are sometimes the ones that happened outside of (or even against) our will—not just bursts of inspiration, but typos, mis-readings, and bad translations. The ghost companion is a sobering and comforting reminder that much of the writing process is out of our hands.

Finally, and most importantly, the ghost companions keep students writing. Dedicate a portion of workshop to sharing excerpts of oracular conversation; this exposes students to the writing of other contemporary poets, and, more importantly fosters a class-wide sense of camaraderie and experimentation. By incorporating the ghosts into the students' daily lives, you incorporate writing into their daily lives. And in doing that, you make the specter of composing Poetry a lot less scary.

MARIANNE TAYLOR • KIRKWOOD COMMUNITY COLLEGE • UNDERGRADUATE • MULTIGENRE

Writing a Collaborative One-Act Through Character Development

In many introductory multigenre classes, students spend a good deal of time learning to develop "character," regardless of the genre in which that character will eventually appear. The following exercise, designed to be spread out over several classes, was developed to create a bridge from individual character development to the writing of a collaborative one-act play. It is assumed students have already written persona poems and explored dramatic monologues.

Initially students should be encouraged to create characters from any number of exercises, including the following: selecting objects from a table upon which classmates have dumped their backpacks, pockets, or handbags, and then creating someone to whom these items belong and bringing that person to life; selecting a photograph or portrait from artwork, magazine or newspaper and speaking in that person's voice; or reading an article in which a character is mentioned briefly or selecting a flat, minor character from a literary work and getting into that character's head.

Students then write journal, diary or blog entries, or letters, email or text messages in that character's voice and full of her/his personality. After these texts are shared in class, approaches to a dramatic monologue that tells a significant piece of the character's story are discussed.

On the day these monologues are read/performed in class, students are told to be on the lookout from among their peers' presentations for a character well-suited to interact with their own. The myriad possibilities are then discussed, and the class eventually arrives at suitable pairs or trios of characters who, when forced to interact, would be likely to produce good theatre.

Now the students, confident in their characters, work in pairs and small groups to create dramatic scenes in which odd and interesting conflicts arise: an irate bus driver confronts a runaway teen; a minister is preached to by a rock star; and a penniless poet is taught to sling hash by a dude ranch cook. (A few examples from a recent class.) With suggestions and troubleshooting from the instructor, dramatic scenes arise quite easily from these strongly-formed characters in conflict, and students collaboratively create one-act plays driven by their character's desires.

After the plays are cast and read in class, a good follow-up activity is to have the writers slip back into character and comment on how their situations were portrayed. Often this opens opportunities for the next one-act, this time individually written.

VALERIE VOGRIN • SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY EDWARDSVILLE • FICTION • GRADUATE

The Invent-a-Form Assignment: An Antidote for Poet-Envy

Eavan Boland writes in her introduction to *The Making of a Poem*, that the form of a poem is its point of departure, "an intercessor from history itself." Many other poets have enumerated the advantages of working in form. In *Ordinary Genius*, Kim Addonizio points to the wonderful and unexpected discoveries unearthed as the poet seeks a path through the form's stipulated rhyme or meter. Readers come to a formal poem such as a sonnet with specific expectations which the poet can work with and against to great effect. In a series of essays examining poetic form in light of recent neurological research, Paul Lake claims that reading metrical poetry actually engages readers in a far more complex experience than reading fiction: "In writing metrical verse, a poet is literally transmitting different sets of triggering patterns in readers, forcing them to coordinate both semantic and spatial elements in multiple processing areas of their brains" ("The Enchanted Loom"). Wow!

How, then, could a fiction writer not experience envy? What antidote for this envy might a fiction writing instructor offer students beyond the thin gifts of genre (i.e. slipstream, satire, realism) and quasi-forms defined almost solely by length (i.e. flash fiction and novella)?

Jerome Stern's *Making Shapely Fiction* envisions various shapes of fiction as "ways to create" in the same sense Boland speaks of poetic form. Stern's shapes, however, necessarily refer only to structure; thus, while a reader may recognize a story based on "Bear at the Door" or "A Day in the Life," the story isn't likely to resonate with the reader in as profound a way as more complexly defined forms, such as a villanelle or sonnet.

Students charged to "Invent a Form" are encouraged to think about form and fiction in entirely new ways. This assignment insists that students be far more ambitious than simply creating an exercise or prompt, asking, for example, *How will you control the creation of a story so that the result (in a skilled practitioner's hands) will be something beautiful or remarkable? What kind of container are you trying to create? What kind of contents could it hold? Can you construct a form that will withstand the test of time?*

Class discussion of the assignment may involve examining models of poetic form, considering matters such as: *What is the fictional equivalent of rhyme? What interesting effects can we create using repetition, sentence or paragraph length, sound, and syllabics? What would be the short fiction counterpart of the sestina, for example, or the ghazal?* The classroom buzzes with excitement. While poets continue to work in centuries-old forms and to create new forms (i.e. the kwansaba), fiction writers may finally have the chance to even the score.

The "Invent a Form" assignment is pithy in its actual instructions: *You should present your form as a set of instructions, a "how-to." You should specify three to ten rules. Be sure to name your form. The set length should be between 500-1500 words. Your instructions should be accompanied by a brief discussion of your invention process and your rationale for the form.*

The length stipulation enables the assignment's final step, in which each student creates a story using another student's form accompanied by a brief commentary, recording what was interesting and challenging about working with the form. The forms, stories, and commentaries are compiled and distributed, and during one of the final meetings of the term, the class discusses the fiction, the process, and the possibilities of form in fiction. The outcomes are unpredictable, yet frequently striking. And don't be surprised if you soon see examples of an "amuse-bouche" or "homeostasis" or "*bellazza e afflizione"* in your favorite literary journal.

ALLISON WILKINS • LYNCHBURG COLLEGE • UNDERGRADUATE • FICTION

Sharing Secrets: A PostSecret Exercise on Character Development

Beginning writers often do not fully develop their characters, especially in an intro to creative writing workshop. They focus on the plot or some other element of fiction, neglecting the characters. Experienced writers know that the story grows from the plot structure through showing (scenes) and telling (exposition) and that the story revolves around the lives of the characters. Students can better understand character through the following exercise:

Students should list or free write basic information of the main character. What is the character's name? What does the character look like? What does this character do for work? Where does he or she come from? Does the character have any distinct mannerisms? Does the character have a family? What is the character's favorite outfit, food, time of day, subject for small talk, color, etc? Does the character have a New York accent or a Southern drawl? Is the character an analytical thinker or more of an abstract thinker? What does the character want and why? How will the character get that? Identify the character's appearance, speech patterns, thought patterns, and behavior. Sketching these basic details as fully as possible should help the student to develop a well thought-out character.

Next, show the students PostSecret (http://postsecret.blogspot.com/), a blog devoted to sharing secrets. The premise behind this blog is that anonymous people write their innermost secrets on a postcard and mail it to a man, Frank, who then posts the postcards every Sunday. Spend some time looking at and discussing the secrets. In the course of the discussion, start to connect these secrets to the characters that the students have created. How would the main character react to this secret if the secret belonged to a supporting character? Does the secret directly involve the main character? What if the secret belongs to a minor character (peripheral to the action) in the story? What if the secret were the main character's?

After reveling in the possibilities, ask students to create a PostSecret for their main character. It should be something that the character would never share with anyone. It may or may not affect the story or plot. Encourage the students to think beyond the surface level of their characters.

Students will see that a character is much more than a placeholder for the action of the plot and story. They discover that once they create fully realized characters, they move beyond "type," and work to keep a character from acting out of his or her "nature." A follow-up assignment may be to have the students bring in the secret postcard and share them with the class, thus creating a space in the classroom for the characters' secrets to spark discussion.