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# Creative Writing Must Play a Bigger Role in the English Classroom

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In his book *The Element: How Finding Your Passions Changes Everything*, Ken Robinson says, "Activities we love fill us with energy even when we are physically exhausted. Activities we don't like can drain us in minutes, even if we approach them at our physical peak of fitness" (93). Not many English teachers I know (if any) have chosen their profession because they enjoy grading five-paragraph essays, assigning how-to speeches, assessing students' competencies according to the one-size-fits-all rubrics, and training students for standardized testing. While these are, arguably, important aspects of instruction, often, they are also the duller, less-inspiring ones, leaving us drained emotionally and physically. Andy Molnar, an English teacher quoted in the book *Writing Unbound: How Fiction Transforms Student Writers* (Newkirk), points out the cause of such dissonance, "We didn't become teachers so we could teach academic writing or argumentative writing or informational writing. The passion was literature and storytelling... It's funny, it's ironic that we are not doing more of that in our profession" (Newkirk 130). As a high-school teacher with over twenty years of experience, I believe that English language and literature instructors must make a conscious effort to bring more creative storytelling into their instruction.

While many literature teachers already integrate some creative writing into their courses, the majority of such assignments are merely meant to supplement the more "academic" approach to the study of literature. From time to time, an English teacher may ask their students to rewrite a few selected scenes from a book using a

different point of view, or to assume an identity of the literary character and create a series of fictional Tweets/diary entries/letters. There is no doubt that such "fanfiction" teaches students empathy by helping them better understand the characters and, by extension, people in the real world. After all, fiction is "a testing ground for practical psychological explorations in identity, in human flaws and pathologies, in the extremes of emotions - and darkness," says Newkirk (57). But it is precisely because of its incredible potential to show our students *how to be* in this world that creative writing has to play a bigger role in the English classroom.

I incorporate multiple opportunities for creative writing into all of my courses, from AP Literature and Composition to Senior Writing, World Literature, and Freshman English. One of the ways I do so is by implementing creative-writing summative assessments instead of tests and analytical papers. Although English teachers often feel pressured to dedicate their class time almost exclusively to the academic types of writing such as literary analysis and research papers, Thomas Newkirk argues that

Fiction writing entails reflection, analysis, close observation, internal debate -- all broadly useful skills that can feed other kinds of writing, even the scientific report. To create characters in conflict, the writer must imagine opposing points of view—a skill needed in argumentation. Fiction writers are typically excellent reviewers, essayists, and nonfiction writers. They don't fall apart when they move outside of fiction - they excel. (8)

Since I usually utilize quizzes, journals, and discussions to assess my students' comprehension and retention skills during the reading units, I do not need to ask students to regurgitate the specifics of each text in the final summative assessment too. Instead, my summative assessments are designed to move students towards the more complex skills, such as synthesis and creation.

For a summative assessment at the end of my unit on Ancient Greek literature, for instance, I ask students to compose and present a dramatic monologue. Students may choose to become any character from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*—Oedipus himself, one of his daughters, Creon, a palace guard, a Greek god, or any made-up individual who just happens to be in Thebes at the time of the tragic events. In their monologues, I expect students to contemplate potential philosophical implications of the text. I also ask students to incorporate a few interactions with their imaginary audience into their monologues just as Plato does in *The Apology*. Throughout the years, I have heard monologues by disgruntled Greek gods, as well as by gods who choose to "troll" Oedipus out of mere boredom, confessions of oracles who make up lies to keep their jobs, Antigone's lamentations about patriarchal societies, Jocasta's meditations on the meaning of true love, and angry citizens' attacks on Oedipus as they blame him for their own shortcomings. As students present their monologues, they act out their characters' ire and glee, they cry, they mock, they respond to the imaginary insults from the crowd. Thus, in their speeches, students do not merely showcase their interpretation of the play and their analyses of the characters; they synthesize everything they have learned about Ancient Greek culture, engage in the process of creation, experiment with the genre of a dramatic monologue, and practice

public-speaking skills. Their writing is usually imaginative and engaging, especially so since they write for a live audience, not just for the teacher. Rebecca W. Black describes fanfiction communities as places where "...fans are using language and writing to create and generate meaning that will be read and enjoyed by other members of the site, rather than graded and discarded" (Black 393). This particular assignment provides my students with a similar community where peers get to enjoy each other's performances, appreciate each other's humor and depth of thinking, and encounter a variety of interpretations. As a teacher, I too get to enjoy everyone's creativity, and, since I can often grade these monologues within a minute or two, I also get to save myself from piles of tedious, formulaic essays about Oedipus.

I resort to creative writing as a summative assessment at the end of my unit on Biblical allusions, as well. After we read a few original Biblical stories and analyze allusions to these stories in literature, art, music, video games, and film, I ask my students to create their own allusive narratives as a way to comment on the problems in our world. Just this year, students have chosen to write about the war in Ukraine, abortion laws, pollution, climate change, animal abuse, corporate greed, arranged marriages, jealousy, and materialism by retelling the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah's ark, Job's trials, Isaac's sacrifice, and Samson and Delilah's affair in contemporary settings. For this particular summative, students have to recall the specifics of the original stories (retention and comprehension), create connections between the original stories and the contemporary world (application), determine which of the stories will work best for their project (analysis and evaluation), decide on a suitable medium for their stories (application), and, finally, create their own

story (synthesis and creation). I require all students to supplement their creative product with an explanatory piece in which they describe how they have chosen to alter the original Biblical story and what their authorial intent was (reverse analysis). While my students work on their creative writing and other modes of art, I get to walk around and talk to them about their ideas; I get to watch them write, paint, compose music, and program *Minecraft* movies; I see them discard their original drafts and start over, share their work with peers, and revise it in order to convey their ideas more effectively. Students' thoughtfulness as they approach this assignment, their engagement and creativity, once again remind me why I have become a teacher to begin with.

Sadly, many English teachers I know refuse to assign creative writing to their classes because they feel that their students' fiction is inferior. And while I can see their point, I tend to agree with Newkirk:

If we are attentive, fully open to the moment, to the novelty of the text, the singularity of the student—that's what's going to help us stay alive as teachers... [I]f you take any student paper and copy four sentences onto Google, you will not find a match for them. [...] Those four sentences have never been written before. Your reading of that paper, your connection to that student, is a unique event in human history. (116)

I have grown to savor my students' originality, their unique stories -- not their mastery, or lack thereof, of individual elements of storytelling. When I use creative writing as a summative, I grade students' fiction according to the school-wide reading rubric instead of the writing one in order to assess their ability to interpret a text. Having taught plenty of Creative Writing courses throughout my career, I have, of course, accumulated many rubrics for fiction writing. Our school has a formal

narrative-writing rubric that I could use, too. However, I have noticed that such writing rubrics often stifle students' creativity rather than nourish it. After all, if I were to score Ernest Hemingway's writing according to one of these narrative-writing rubrics, he might easily be labeled as merely "sufficient" in terms of his idea development, syntax, and diction due to his minimalistic descriptions, seemingly simple vocabulary, and short sentences. William Faulkner would be likely penalized for his ambiguous language, missing transitions, and use of improper syntax. Sandra Cisneros would fail when it comes to employing a traditional plot structure -- exposition, rising action, climax, and denouement -- and for her reliance on fragments. And yet, all three are remarkable writers whose work is widely enjoyed for its originality, freshness, and their refusal to comply with the "norms." I want my students to explore issues and feel "rewarded for creating innovative texts that push the limits of traditional genres and formats of writing" (Black 393), not be penalized for being amateur writers.

Besides using fiction in place of major reading assessments, I often utilize it as practice, too, in order to help my students internalize specific literary elements. When I review plot structure with my AP classes, for instance, I ask my students to write their own short stories with at least three of the structural devices we have encountered in published fiction -- reverse chronology, flashbacks, repetends, in medias res, deus ex machina, etc. When we look at vernacular and formal diction and syntax, I assign another piece in which students are asked to either create two characters conversing in contrasting styles or to display some other kind of a shift from formal to vernacular. In World Literature classes, after we read an excerpt from *One Thousand and One Nights*, students write a story within another story within a third story in order to emulate

the technique Scheherazade employed to avoid an execution by the misogynistic sultan. There are no required word counts for these assignments, no expectations of rising action, climax, resolution, and no rubrics - the goal is simply to share a story with their peers while integrating some of the writing techniques we have examined in class. Although there are times when my students read each other's work and make suggestions for improvement, I usually prefer to let them simply experience each other's stories. To do so, all students are expected to share their writing with their classmates. To encourage them to feel safe while experimenting, I allow anonymous sharing. After I distribute all stories to random peers, each group reads its given stories, choosing the best one to share with the whole class. I do not establish any criteria for "the best piece" prior to the activity, stressing out the very subjectivity of the process. As a result, I have observed that it is this informal process of sharing with each other and not the rubrics and the rigid criteria provided by the teacher that sets a higher standard for everyone - most students want their peers to like what they write, and, thus, they write better. Lammers and Marsh suggest that participation in such writing communities "[scaffolds] students' critical analysis of how to write for and with the audiences in networked publics" and "can empower youth as they seek to solve real-world problems" (8). As their teacher, I am delighted to provide them with this opportunity. This activity also strengthens the bond between my students and me since they get to see me react to their stories alongside their peers. For a few minutes, I cease being an evaluator and become a reader like the rest of them, an individual moved by each shared piece of writing.

Whenever my students work on fiction to practice specific literary elements, I allow free choices of topics and genre. Many of

them gasp in disbelief when they hear that, fully expecting me to prohibit them from writing about certain topics, but, since fiction is a "testing ground for practical psychological explorations" (Newkirk 57), I let my students explore the topics that draw them in. After all, Fyodor Dostoevsky did not kill anyone with an ax even though his Raskolnikov did, and Vladimir Nabokoff was not a pedophile unlike his Humbert Humbert. If any of my students seem initially intimidated by the freedom of choice and are unsure what to write about, I offer my assistance and a few prompts to choose from, including fanfiction prompts. Many best-selling authors have built their careers on fanfiction, including E. L. James, whose infamous *Fifty Shades of Grey* started as online fanfiction for Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series. Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* novels are derivative of Greek mythology, and so are Homer's *Odyssey* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*; Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* are based off other authors' plots; and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is, in turn, derivative of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which is why I do not discriminate against fanfiction in the classroom. Over the years, I have read plenty of spin-offs of *Twilight* series, *Walking Dead*, *The Last of Us*, *American Horror Story*, and *Games of Thrones*, as well as scenarios from video games I cannot pretend to know.

Whether authentic or derivative, whether funny, tragic, sentimental, or dystopian, fiction-writing engages my students in learning. Justin Parmenter says,

... much of our curriculum [...] allows little room for freedom of exploration. For young people who are at a time in life when many of their decisions are made for them, this lack of power can be very demotivating and can negatively impact their interest and effort... When students are given opportunities to

experiment with their voices and create through their own original work, they feel a sense of place and they are able to feel in charge.

Both fiction and fanfiction must play a bigger role in the high-school English classroom since by engaging students in learning, we engage teachers in teaching.

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