Creative Writing for Professional Writing Majors

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As the other chapters in this anthology point out and as the STEM-to-STEAM movement in K–12 education suggests, the capabilities and habits of mind learned in practicing the arts are essential to lifelong success in a professional world that values flexible skills in decision-making, problem-solving, and empathy. These skills and habits of mind are cultivated in the visual and performing arts, but creative writing workshops offer another, though perhaps less visible, venue for artistic development. Universities often offer creative writing courses as part of the traditional literature major; however, this arrangement can obscure the professional value of the skills taught in creative writing workshops (including storytelling, attention to detail, empathy, and concern for crafting sentences). Such skills may be particularly important for writers training for positions in business and non-profit organizations who will write for ever-changing platforms and tell their organizations' stories to an increasingly diverse but segmented audience.

These are the kinds of writers enrolled in the Writing and Rhetoric BA Program at St. Edward's University, a small liberal arts university in Austin, Texas. We have found that both students and employers value the experience gained in creative writing courses taken as part of the writing major.

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Based on our experience redesigning an undergraduate writing major and utilizing research into the role of creativity in professional success, this chapter argues for the inclusion of creative writing courses in the professional writing curriculum and describes a program in which creative writers participate with aspiring journalists, editors, and marketing writers in an undergraduate writing and rhetoric major. Programs like these allow creative writing students to learn editing, digital media skills, and rhetorical history, while the professional writing and journalism students benefit from the collaboration and critique of a writing workshop. This program foregrounds the habits of mind listed as essential to success in academic and career writing by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project. By helping young writers develop not only their creativity but also their curiosity, openness, engagement, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition,[1] the St. Edward's writing major produces students ready to engage with the challenges of the twenty-first-century world.

While the BA in English is well known, the BA in writing is a relatively new phenomenon. Once considered "instruction in the basics of educated discourse,"[2] writing at the turn of the twenty-first century has become a skill in demand by employers and a program that has saved many English departments. The early 2000s have been called, by Weisser and Grobman, the "decade of the writing major"[3] as so many programs were established between 2000 and 2010. Curricula in the new writing majors vary considerably, with many majors still linked to literature programs. A growing number of other programs, however, pair a professional focus with a theoretical background from the ancient liberal art of rhetoric.[4] Spigelman and Grobman argue that a rhetorically based program gives students the tools to "appreciate the social, cultural, and ethical obligations of their future roles as rhetors,"[5] while also teaching workplace writing skills, since rhetoric has a history as a practical art. Dominic Delli Carpini argues that "there are many reasons why offering profession-based outcomes, while still staking a claim to geographies within liberal education, is more than just a compromise position."[6] Rhetorical tools of critical thinking and analysis allow students to use the practical skills they acquire in thoughtful, effective ways.

These professionally focused majors have proven to be successful within the humanities. Enrollments have been strong; for example, Florida State University reported 700 students enrolled in its Editing, Writing, and Media Program in 2013.[7] A 2015 anthology profiling undergraduate

writing majors showed the average enrollment at 18 institutions, many regional state or liberal arts institutions, to be 67 majors with 8.6 full-time faculty positions.[8] Here at St. Edward's University, writing and rhetoric is the second largest major in the School of Humanities, enrolling almost three times as many majors as our colleagues in the literature program in 2015–2016.

Despite historical ties to the liberal arts, over time, writing and rhetoric programs tend to become more professionally focused and less humanistic or rhetorical. The story of the Pennsylvania State—Berks/Lehigh Professional and Technical Writing Program, formed in 2000, is instructive. After several years of operation, program administrators gathered data from students and from an advisory board of local employers who asked for more focus on professional skills, and so the program was revamped to meet this need. The department had learned that "despite our belief that theory is requisite to practice, we came to see that our majors needed to know Quark and FrontPage at least as much as Foucault and Foss."[9]

These relatively new professional writing programs have produced writing graduates who then can find jobs in a variety of fields. Weisser and Grobman[10] surveyed graduates of the Penn State—Berks/Lehigh's writing program mentioned above and found that their alumni reported holding jobs much like those reported by the alumni from the St. Edward's writing and rhetoric program who post their job titles on LinkedIn. Graduates from both programs are working in publishing or marketing or they hold communication positions in government agencies or nonprofits. However, despite sending students into professions such as advertising and marketing, which reward creative thinking and writing, few of the BA or BS programs in professional writing offer much in the way of creative writing coursework.

Recently, Douglas Hesse, past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, among others, has argued that writing programs should embrace creative writing because creative and professional writing can complement each other effectively.[11] Creative writing workshops help to teach the habits of mind we want students to develop as undergraduates. In crafting new pieces, students practice the kind of innovation, imagination, and creativity that both employers and world leaders cite as necessary to the coming age.[12] Workshops themselves give students a practicum or lab experience in peer review, teaching them to give and receive criticism well, and to revise work in response to audience needs.

Thus, our core curriculum combines what professional writing classes can do well—teaching rhetorical awareness of audience and situation, use of form, translation of content—with what creative writing does well—examining the unknown, inventing new forms and structures, creating audiences as well as writing for them. This yields versatile, responsive, innovative writers who are better prepared to respond well to both the known tasks they will face in the working world and the new written forms technology will create in the future that we cannot possibly anticipate.

Courses in creative writing and professional writing have existed side-by-side in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric at St. Edward's since the department was formed in 1987. Beginning in 2002, the writing program offered separate concentrations for professional and creative writing. As part of our 2015 curricular review, however, we decided to require all students to take both kinds of coursework. We hoped to emphasize the value of both kinds of writing and their ability to cross-pollinate. There is a larger pedagogical precedent for this. In surveying the use of creative writing in writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) initiatives, Alexandria Peary offers evidence for its value as an interdisciplinary pedagogy.[13] Our own local research revealed that many internship supervisors and recent alumni of the program value the skills learned in creative writing workshops, including the ability to seek out and make effective use of criticism—a requirement for any writer working as part of a professional team. Finally, during a 2014 academic-program review, our external reviewers suggested that we require that all professional writing majors take at least one introductory, multigenre creative writing workshop and that all specialists in creative writing take at least one professional writing course. They reasoned that both kinds of skills and pedagogies were important for a broad understanding of writing. In designing the new curriculum for the major, based on this program review, we identified key skills that we believe the creative writing course both fosters and reinforces: storytelling, shaping of voice, comfort with uncertainty, crafting high-level sentences, focus on details and brevity, understanding of genre, and teamwork through peer review.

Storytelling is perhaps the most important skill fostered in creative writing, one needed by professional writers, from journalists to marketing copywriters. Rhetoric has traditionally noted the role of language in shaping our realities. Richard Vatz points out that writers shape reality by directing readers' attention, by granting "salience"[14] to some elements of reality and ignoring others. Professional writers pay attention to the power

of language in shaping reality, in shaping the identity of the writer, and enacting the writer's social relationship with the audience. Positioning one's audience ("invoking audience" in Ede and Lunsford's terms[15]) and presenting one's self effectively are as important in professional storytelling as in fiction writing. Questions of what details to state baldly, what to suggest, what point-of-view to write from are decisions made by storytellers in creative writing workshops, but they are clearly also decisions that must be made by our professional writers when they take jobs as communications directors or social-media managers. Consider the following example of a job posted on LinkedIn by Lowe's Companies, Inc., for a "senior storyteller": "Lowe's Senior Storyteller is responsible for creating a cohesive and coordinated set of strategic narratives around Customer Experience Design. … The Senior Storyteller will work collaboratively … to understand key communication needs, audiences, and storylines that drive the design work forward" (posting September 18, 2015). Any professional writers applying for that position would have been well served by taking a fiction workshop that helps students learn the "fundamentals of compelling storytelling"[16] and trains students in the effective use of narrative arcs and selection of salient details. Moreover, Janelle Adsit points to the connection between the ways selves are crafted and presented in creative nonfiction and in social media.[17] As our students take jobs in which they translate the ideas or goals of an organization into a cohesive media voice, this training in character creation will serve them well. Creative writing's attention to creating stories, characters, and worlds—as well as its focus on sentence crafting—can benefit professional writers. At St. Edward's, all writing majors take a series of three courses on crafting sentences. Students study English grammar as a linguist would, to understand how the phrases and clauses of their native or acquired language work; afterward, they look at how various choices of language affect style and meaning. Creative writing workshops build on that foundation. Perhaps nowhere is revision more expected and attention to sentence-level choices more acute than in poetry and fiction workshops. Our professional writers can learn a great deal from practicing this kind of attention to the detail of language choices and their effects on the text and its audience.

In the mandatory course Introduction to Creative Writing, as well as in creative writing electives, students often focus on the craft of syntax as a key tool of meaning. In poetry units, students examine MacArthur Fellow Ellen Bryant Voigt's idea of syntactical structure as "the purposeful order in which materials are released to the reader."[18] Students practice changing

the length, layout, and order of syntax to see how the way in which information unfolds to the reader determines the reader's experience of both emotion and meaning in a poem. They begin to understand how syntax governs pacing, dramatic impact, the awakening of connotations, and thus, resonance. This requires them to understand the audience experience from the perspective of craft and allows majors to see how grammar and syntax apply to invention (in every sense of the word). The creative writing workshop completes the grammar cycle in which students move from rule to craft, from craft to art.

This very particular focus on how language creates meaning will be especially helpful for students who pursue careers that include writing in short forms. Whether they become advertising executives who write commercials or they manage a Twitter account for a non-profit or a newspaper, these students will better understand how to use brevity for maximum impact. Brief forms such as slogans, jingles, and catch phrases often show awareness of dual meanings, attention to the tension between connotation and denotation, and a kind of curiosity about how language is employed. The kind of deep attention to syntactical detail that renders a fictional world real or gives a poetic image resonance is the same detail that will create a winning campaign for non-profit donors or make a politician's speech memorable. In all these spaces, the power of the order in which information is released to the reader gives our majors an advanced way to think about the function and craft of language.

The workshop model common to creative writing classes also offers an extended study in peer review. Peer review often is key to the work of any writing class, but we spend less time in and on peer review than we do on other parts of teaching writing. Creative writing workshops flip the classroom in a way, requiring the teacher and all students, rather than smaller groups of peers, to participate. Workshop sessions let students see a larger number of peers working through ideas and methods of communication. They also allow the professor to give targeted feedback not only about the piece at hand but also about the way students are discussing the piece. This space offers a unique opportunity to assess and develop student voices both as writers and as readers. Students learn to craft accurate, useful descriptions of both what a piece of writing is doing and what their reaction is to that text. For most students, this makes them more effective when they later go into classes (or jobs) that employ peer review in short bursts, on specific tasks, or in service of particular goals.

In the workshops, students practice teamwork. They must be attentive not just to the document but also to the social dynamics of the room. They face real-world problems in presenting their evaluations of a text well: If they offer unqualified praise or only praise, they might build social cohesion, but the author will have little information with which to understand the text or begin revision. If workshop participants criticize work too vaguely or vehemently, they might shut down the possibilities the writer inherently perceives in the piece but hasn't yet realized. If we are to have students who create functional, congenial teams but who still effectively problem-solve and expect excellence from all team members, they must learn to navigate this dynamic.

Additionally, we have found that employers appreciate that creative writing students are accustomed to hearing multiple critiques of their work and view such criticism as constructive; writers who have experienced creative writing workshops seem less likely to take criticism personally on the job, a valuable skill for all writers, but especially for those early in their careers. It is possible this stems from the ways in which creative writing makes the author more vulnerable. In other writing classes, a student might be able to hide behind the assignment (e.g., "I had to write this biographical essay, so that's why I'm talking about my childhood"), but in creative classes, all students know that everything in a document is a choice made by the author. Creative work is also often read as being autobiographical, even when it's not. The idea that the writer is deeply identified with the piece—an assumption not necessarily made for more academic or professional documents—makes the dilemma of how to critique a text connected to an author more salient. Students understand they are in negotiation with both text and person. In this way, workshops also help students practice the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that are vital to teamwork.

This team effort of the workshops demonstrates to students the need to develop empathy—as does the creation of the art itself and the reader's experience of it. As a reader, the act of placing oneself in another's shoes creates empathy for another's world experience. Many writers and readers of fiction discuss the way this art form can be a vehicle for opening the self up to other points of view or orientations to the world. President Obama recently said while speaking with novelist Marilynne Robinson,

> When I think about how I understand my role as citizen, setting aside being president … the most important stuff I've learned I think I've learned from

novels. It has to do with empathy. It has to do with being comfortable with the notion that the world is complicated and full of grays, but there's still truth there to be found, and that you have to strive for that and work for that. And the notion that it's possible to connect with some[one] else even though they're very different from you.[19]

One could argue that this need for creating empathy would be equally well served in literature classes. However, in a workshop, the reader actually is practicing empathy in two directions: first, with characters or people in the piece; second, with the author as he/she makes creative decisions and works to hone the craft of the piece. Allying this living empathy with the empathy created by a text deepens the experience. Whether students practice creative nonfiction or fiction, they must create characters who have resonance for readers and who lead the audience through a world they do not know. As a writer, crafting a world well requires a kind of empathy for a reader: What will they understand? Where will they be lost? This prepares professional and technical writers as they learn to write for an audience and to conduct studies to understand users' needs and how their work can respond to those needs.

At its heart, part of empathy comes from becoming comfortable with the unknown. Creative writing workshops give fledgling storytellers' hands-on training in negotiating uncertainty. In many writing classes, it is possible to build a rubric for what a final draft of a document such as an academic essay or memo should do and to apply that rubric to an early draft. In creative workshops, however, often the student and professor are figuring out concurrently what success for a particular piece will be. One poem may require a focus on image to succeed, while another may eschew image for linguistic music. While a good poem must use craft techniques, until that first draft is produced, neither the poet nor the workshop leader knows which technique will be most valuable to its completion. This makes it almost impossible to have a single rubric or a comprehensive guide for either writers or workshop participants. Thus students must learn to be comfortable negotiating drafts and revision without absolute guideposts.

While creative courses examine standard components of craft (for instance, in poetry: line breaks, musicality, and structure), inevitably students will have to do their own searching to figure out why a piece moves them or does not. This often requires students to perform deeper analysis of the text and become better readers of structure and craft. It is this

skill—the ability to investigate in meaningful ways, even without guideposts—that makes our students the kind of employees who will be able to respond to the next generation of genres. This training in nimble thinking will also help students be the kind of people who can switch careers (and thus written genres) easily, using the tools they learn in all core classes to apply to a new range of problems and audiences. While professional writing programs often teach a rhetorical perspective on the study of "how various disciplines and activities use language for particular purposes,"[20] in creative writing workshops purposes can be infinite, governed not programmatically by audience but rather by what the piece itself needs or dictates. Literature must be invented anew in each work, and in order to evaluate a piece, a student must become skilled at seeing it in the realm of previous production but also as an *in situ* thing. In these ways, creative writing workshops may prompt students to ask harder questions and become more nimble problem-solvers.

This is especially useful as students enter the workplace, where audience parameters are sometimes more nuanced, contradictory, or absent than in academic situations. Working to create an audience, instead of just responding to one, is vital in fields such as publicity and advertising, where one is drawing on what already exists, but essentially seeking to create the next experience, the next zeitgeist. While our students must have knowledge and developed skills, to be truly successful they must recognize that what is already known cannot always determine what needs to be produced. The most successful professionals in these positions have to take a leap into the unknown. The comfort with innovation will be key to our students' ability to move up through organizations over the course of their careers.

Writers able to work collaboratively and creatively, writers who pay careful attention to their sentence craft and to the readers of their texts, writers who can deal flexibly and thoughtfully with uncertainty and with new worlds—these are the kinds of writers who will succeed as professional communicators. Professional writers need to feel comfortable with a variety of professional genres, and they must be able to think analytically about the elements of communication. They also need to see their craft as a creative one. Rather than seeing their writing as a recording of facts, professional writers need to see themselves as storytellers, bearing responsibility for the realities they construct. Doing so can make them more attentive to their craft but also more responsible for what they write. This is the kind of consciousness that can help professional writers, as Delli

Carpini noted, "to go beyond the imitation of already-finished professional discourses, and to examine the social constructions placed upon them by their occupational roles."[21]

The rhetoric courses in the program at St. Edward's emphasize the ethical and practical responsibilities of the rhetor/writer, but students benefit as well from the skills and habits of mind emphasized in creative writing workshops. We predict that our writers will succeed better in the long run if they bring to their work a professional's knowledge of how language can work, a rhetor's ethical understanding of audience and situation, and an artist's tools. We hope that emphasizing these foundational skills will allow our students to approach a variety of professional writing situations flexibly and creatively over the course of their careers.

NOTES

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21. Delli Carpini, "Re-Writing the Humanities," 17.