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Read Around #2
Hart-Davidson/AL885

A Pedagogy for the Perplexed: How to Teach Creative Nonfiction

We differ about what our courses are supposed to achieve, about how effective writing is best produced, about what an effective classroom looks like, and about what it means to make knowledge. (Fulkerson 681)

Next semester is already looming before me like a spider in the shower. I'd like to ignore its presence, its closeness, but I know if I do, soon enough it'll be crawling on my skin. The web? I just found out that I'll be teaching English 101 (freshman rhetoric) and English 190, a creative writing course, which I taught last year as well. I'm thinking about creative nonfiction (CNF): I'd like to teach it in both courses, which I've done before but never simultaneously..

So I copy and paste last semester's syllabus for 101 into a new Word document. I'll keep a lot of it: course purpose and goals, attendance policy (or do I tweak this because of Amy who swore she couldn't follow my math?), plagiarism policy, etc. These I haven't changed for quite some time: if it ain't broke, don't fix it as my dad always says when he doesn't want to go to the doctor. For 190, I do the same. And then I look at my course goals and course descriptions.

Suddenly I'm baffled: why are the goals for creative writing so different from those for composition? If I teach CNF in both courses, will I do it in the same way? Will my pedagogy be different, and if so, why? If composition isn't a "service course" but a subject in its own right, how is it different from creative writing, a course never thought of as a service course? Do I have different goals for these students? Are the things I value about writing—what makes good writing, how to go about the writing process, what writing can do for you as an academic, citizen, human being—are these not the same despite the course label? Isn't writing writing?

An article from CCC, 1995, made an attempt to "seek common ground" by stating "primary traits" for all composition courses: "We set these forth not simply for the first-year course, but as assumptions addressing the larger question of what makes any course a course in *writing*" (David et al 525, emphasis theirs). These traits? "The development of writing ability and metacognitive awareness is the primary objective...students' writing is the privileged text..." and "the subject of a writing course is writing" (525).

Of course, the field here is composition and chances are good that they aren't crossing boundaries with these traits, but they sound like both comp and creative writing. Like a good little academic (and, of course, because it's required for a course I'm taking), I do some research into the area, into the cross-section of personal writing in composition courses, how it is viewed from the perspective of mainstream journals in the field like College Composition and Communication (CCC) and College English. I hit the databases, using search words like "creative," "personal," "nonfiction," even "expressivist" and "expressive." I then go directly to the hardcopies of 2005 and 2006, since these aren't online. Strangely, CCC has little to say about the subject. College English, on the other hand, was a bit more prolific, although most of the articles were a little on the old side (although I hesitate to call anything younger than me "old"). I know I'm going outside assignment parameters with this "old" stuff, but I decide to

keep pursuing my question. I really want an answer, so I hope as I take chances I'm not killing my chances of success...

I think there's a real chance right now for letting the possibilities of creative nonfiction infuse, improve, and invigorate the teaching of composition. (Bishop 259)

In Wendy Bishop's article in *College English* from 2003 titled "Suddenly Sexy: Creative Nonfiction Rear-ends Composition," she brings up the question of whether or not personal writing in composition courses is seen as a means rather than an end (262). This is, I believe, an important distinction: the students in my 101 course will for certain see any paper they write in my class as a means, not an end. After all, who will ever read what they write besides me and their classmates? They won't do anything with these 101 papers except maybe look back on them later and laugh at how naïve they were or how badly they wrote: I know that's what I did. On the other hand, my creative writing students think of their writing as not a means but an end. They are there to make something—however amateur—and think of it as an art form. Indeed, Alma College considers 190 a "performance art" and counts it as credit for that requirement.

Bishop also notes another difference in the approach to CNF from the compositionist's perspective versus the creative writer's perspective: in composition, "essayists seek to discover, clarify, preserve, value and share," aims which are "not well transmitted in recent textbooks of creative nonfiction" (266). I can't agree or disagree because I haven't read "recent textbooks of creative nonfiction." Too, Bishop seems to feel that, from the creative writing perspective, there is little theoretical groundwork on which creative nonfiction pedagogy is based, whereas the essay in composition courses is firmly grounded in theory. Bishop would like to see the two collide: the art and the theory, the benefits of both. Then, she says, "students might be better prepared to investigate the questions they ask: What is creative nonfiction...? How do essays, memoirs, and the writing of place compare? What is the relation of fact to fiction in writing?" (267). She believes much can be gained from teaching this genre in composition and in creative writing, as do I.

But, she says, we need to believe in students as writers and we need to see narrative as valuable. Those who argue against personal writing in composition classrooms often think we are asking too much when we expect our students to actually write something that someone besides the teacher would ever care to read, and, they argue, narrative has no place in academic writing. This attitude, says Bishop, needs to change (268). If we begin to see our students as writers, only then will they begin to see themselves in the same light, a goal shared by all (good?) teachers of writing.

I don't have a problem looking at my students as writers; in fact, I usually start out the semester trying to convince them of just that and hope throughout the semester that they begin to see themselves as writers, even if in a limited sense. But Bishop is right about the means and ends: I know in 190 I would have students read a lot of CNF, talk about the elements of the genre and the author's craft, then just take a stab at it. And I'd let them write about anything. I also know I wouldn't treat it the same in a comp class. In the past I've had them research an area of interest and incorporate their findings into a CNF piece, or I've done it as part of a multigenre project. But to just let them go? Write about anything? I would feel as though I were not doing my job. So I'm still questioning myself: are purposes for writing in the 101 course very different from 190? Will I blindly, without theoretical purposes, have students write in 190?

Should I teach CNF the same in both courses? If I need to change one to be more like the other, what would I change? I still don't know.

Lad Tobin points out that students frequently feel that the translation from their own mode of expression to the academic language required in a course actually dislodges cohesive identity. (J. Harris 184).

Judith Harris, in her article “Re-writing the subject: Psychoanalytic approaches to creative writing and composition pedagogy” from *College English*, 2001, looks carefully at the differences in pedagogy between creative writing courses and composition courses. She believes that the line between composition and creative writing is much fuzzier than we'd like to think, that often the dividing line is that composition isn't creative and creative writing ignores audience, rhetorical purpose, and social context (177). Not so, says Harris: all writing is creative just as all writing is for an audience, has a rhetorical purpose, and cannot avoid social context. It's only a matter of what the instructor draws attention to. Too, Harris believes that all writing courses—creative, expository, professional, etc—should not separate and think of themselves as distinct, but rather “should ideally work together in a more integrative and comprehensive process of developing ideas about the self (or the subject) and the social world that are always in dialectical formation” (180).

Harris then brings in psychoanalysis as a way of thinking about this, discussing Freud's theories about creative writing and its ability to work out what is within. She explains, quite elaboratively, the positives, psychologically speaking, of personal writing. But is this the job of a composition classroom? Creative writing teachers don't have a problem (usually) seeing this as part of their job, to sort through the muck of students' lives. It comes with the territory. Is it part of composition territory as well? Or do we have other priorities? According to Harris, it needs to be. She explains that students are often paralyzed by the need to write like academics, that their discomfort and often failure at composition is due to the conflict between the id and the superego—here known as the creative writer and the ever-present self-editor, that nagging voice students have that won't let them find their own voice, be themselves, that squelches what they would write like it they were unrestricted—as in a creative writing course (183). Harris feel composition teachers need to approach writing more like creative writing teachers do in order to get beyond the dichotomy of creative versus academic writing: it's all writing.

The composition teacher's primary response to student writing will thus be to encourage more writing in order to help a student to know what he or she would not have known without beginning to write. Like the leader of a creative writing workshop, the composition teacher can learn to neither validate nor criticize either the ego or the unconscious desire of the student. The instructor can ask for more. Emphasis then is placed on a powerful delivery of these personal events so that the student focuses on the persuasive means rather than the "ends" of the work, what is integral to self-expression and self-presentation. (J. Harris 198)

Okay, so I need to lean more toward the way I would teach creative writing, at least says Harris, and ease up on “rules” to keep them writing. Is this the only reason? So that my students can do this self-exploration and stop being afraid of the editor? I know that from my own experience I approach the writing differently: when I have a “paper” to write, my mindset is very different from when I do my creative writing. Is this hindering my academic writing? I don't know. Then

I look at the quote I just typed in: Harris is saying that a creative approach allows students to think more about means than ends. Is this opposite of what Bishop said? I don't think so: it's more a matter of purpose, that in a creative writing pedagogy students really are allowed to focus on craft because they think of their writing as purposeful. In comp, they're just writing for class and all that matters is getting it done and getting the grade. Of course, many want to learn, but not in the ways creative writers do. I'm thinking Harris has a point...

I'm disappointed: I just spent at least two hours reading through several articles from College English that sounded promising; indeed, they all talk about personal writing, and most about personal writing in the composition classroom. But none of them talk at all about how to teach the personal. Even a special issue in 2001, completely devoted to personal writing, had nothing to say on the issue; their main focus is on discussing whether or not personal writing should be part of a composition course, and most of them say yes. What is interesting, however, is that their purposes are very different from those voices I have heard so far: they see personal writing as a means. Period. It helps students open up, helps them get started in the semester, helps give them confidence—all so they can then write successful academic papers, the real goal. I'm thinking that a journal like Pedagogy might have more to say, since it is, after all, a journal about teaching.

Rochelle Harris, in her *Pedagogy* article titled “Encouraging Emergent Moments: The Personal, Critical, and Rhetorical in the Writing Classroom,” argues for the many ways that creative nonfiction (specifically) can achieve the same goals that we value in composition courses: it involves “exhaustive research, reality presented with style and artful language...close reading, for writing and revising, and for commitment to the work, the stories being told, and the voice chosen” to name a few (407). Harris doesn't see creative nonfiction as fluff, nor as a means to an end (like a research paper), but as a valid vehicle of composition as a “textual response, a deliberate act of composition that moves through the personal, the social, the political, and the rhetorical...” (408). When it comes to actually teaching creative nonfiction, however, Harris finds that her approach to it differs from other genres, especially when it comes to responding and grading. She has difficulty, she says, when it comes to clear markers of “good writing” like a clear purpose, careful organization and editing, well-supported claims—while these things are all present, they are much more difficult to force into specifics the way we can with more academic writing (409). She had to “unmake these categories and remake [her] response pedagogy” to accommodate the differences (409). One of the things she does differently is that she actually refers students to other readings in her responses to drafts, readings that “emphasize the critical and the rhetorical” (415) to emphasize the writer's choices about “purpose, content, audience, and so on” (416).

Rochelle was hired at CMU as their new CNF person just as I was graduating, taking Bob Root's place, and Marcy Taylor adores her, so I trust this person (not that I don't trust these other authors). But I know she's good at this, at teaching CNF and composition. So it's interesting to me that she leans more toward a composition-type approach when teaching CNF: it sounds like she treats it as she would a research paper. Granted she has to respond differently, but frankly that seems like a given. And while the entire article approaches teaching CNF in the composition classroom rather than in a creative writing course, the assumption is there: CNF is a “creative” genre. Okay, so now I have to rethink, and then think some more:

am I making my creative writing course too abstract? Do I not pay enough attention to the conventions of writing like organization, support, purpose? Probably not...

Karen Ueling wrote “The Flow of River Writing: Framing a Creative Nonfiction Class,” an article published in *Pedagogy*. Although her article never discusses CNF as a possibility for composition courses, her article does discuss the pedagogy of teaching CNF as creative writing. She framed her course around a river near her campus and students observed the river, kept a journal, researched its history, and eventually wrote from this. The class ended up with some published work, some prize-winning essays, and a CD of their work. She says that she spends considerable time on “journaling, excerpting, drafting, revising, and polishing” (314). Sounds like a fun course, very similar to one I took as an undergrad.

I included this article because of its specific creative writing focus rather than how it could be incorporated into composition. What strikes me is that there seems to be no real difference—except for actually visiting the river—between what she does with her CNF students and the things that would occur when working on a research paper. There is, however, one big goal-oriented difference: these students composed “real writing,” something that could be published, win awards, that others would want to listen to on a CD. They produced literature. This seems like an important distinction between what goes on in a composition class (mine at least—and all others I’ve ever known of): the approach is that these students think of themselves as writers, as artists. I just don’t see why we can’t adopt this attitude, this approach, with comp students, why we can’t give them something to write that they might take a little pride in. I remember the students who did CNF as part of the multigenre project a few years ago at CMU in my comp class. When they had to select one genre to read to the class, the one they were most proud of, the CNF pieces—without exception—were the ones they chose. They stood there reading with that “can you believe I wrote this?” look on their faces. So now I’m thinking I need to shift my goals more toward the creative writing side. Man, this seesawing is getting confusing.

“Teaching Creative Writing in the Public Urban University,” written by Nicole Cooley, was in *Pedagogy* in 2003. Cooley takes an honest look back at various pedagogies tried in her creative writing classrooms and how her teaching has changed over the years when she realized what worked and what didn’t, like “anonymous workshops,” which she realized erased student identity: they were leaving out anything that would let others know who wrote their piece! In the end, she advocates using models of each genre to get students writing. They read and analyze various authors and their craft then write in the genre, modeling their writing after what they have read. Her creative writing class, she says, looks an awful lot like a lit course; indeed, she would like to see the two of them as less distinct.

Well I guess that’s one direction I would not go in the composition classroom: giving students a heavy reading load and then copying or emulating the genre. Then again, I already give them a light reading load and if I’m introducing a genre I don’t think they would be terribly familiar with or comfortable writing in, I give them samples. For example, I would never have students write CNF without having them read some Annie Dillard, some E.B. White, some David Sedaris, etc. Not even in the composition classroom. That would be like asking them to write a paradoxical encomium without a sample. A what? Yeah, a paradoxical encomium, one of the most fun little essays to write. And because CNF escapes definition so elusively and consists of

so many variations, it seems that several samples is the only way to let students in on the genre. So I guess I lied: I would do this, indeed have done it, at least to a degree.

I think that nonfiction is what composition is when it's at home and also when it wants to get dressed and go out into the world. (Root 293)

So I have come to the end of my research. I'm both delighted and disappointed: delighted that some of my questions were answered, disappointed on the sparse choices I had to work with. It's as though no one ever really asked this question before: if we are teaching the same genre, do we teach it in the same way? And if we don't, why? Does this mean that the genre of CNF becomes a vehicle with different purposes depending on the course it is taught in? It seems that the answer to the last question is a resounding yes. And perhaps this is why, as Bob Root humorously explains, there seemingly is no place for CNF while the truth is that CNF is everywhere, in every English course you can imagine. It has been around as long as people have been writing, yet only now is being thought of as a genre of its own. The problem, of course, is that when a genre has the freedom of creativity yet the restrictions of truth, it becomes a slippery little eel.

Yet I know it is taught differently because I have taught it differently without even realizing it. Truth is, I can't imagine a composition course that has students reading entire books of CNF, discussing it from a literary perspective, and then having students model their writing after what they had read. That is just so non-comp. We don't work that way. For one, it takes the emphasis off writing as the subject and puts it back on literature, a move many of us are very hesitant to make these days (as if lit weren't already privileged enough). But the idea Bishop presented first—the difference between means and ends—plops itself right at the heart of this question of the place of CNF. And I can't for the life of me think of one good reason why we can't have composition students write CNF as an end. Why can't we have them write something that will win prizes and be put on CDs? I can hardly imagine a 101 course where my students are so excited about their writing that they want to anthologize it, record it, and publish it. But why not?

After all this reading (and writing) I'm coming to some conclusions: One, composition courses need to treat students as authors, as writers, and give assignments that make them feel as such. Two, creative writing courses should never lose sight of the fact that students are writing—no matter the genre—and writing conventions like purpose, organization, support, etc should never be neglected (accept maybe for poetry?). Three, students need to read before they will write well; all writing is intertextual and we can't pretend they can write in a vacuum. Fourth, creative nonfiction has value in both composition courses and creative writing courses. It belongs in both places. It can achieve some of the goals of both courses, even if they are decidedly different. Lastly, and certainly not of least importance, the "larger field" of composition does certainly view pedagogical approaches to personal writing differently than those in creative writing and in creative nonfiction. I believe they could learn from one another, that an integrated approach to writing, whether it's titled creative or academic, would benefit our students: the academics need to acknowledge the creativity in all writing and creative writers need to acknowledge writing conventions. And I need to tweak both my 101 and 190 syllabi, where both will read, under course goals: for you to leave this course as an author of creative nonfiction.

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