**Course Description**

*English 890: Studies in Composition and Rhetoric* is a seminar designed for graduate students in English at the University of South Carolina, a public research university with a population of approximately 25,000 students, about 8,500 of whom are graduate students. The course counts as elective credit for MA and PhD students in English majoring in composition and rhetoric, American literature, or British literature; for MFA students majoring in creative writing; and for MAT and MT candidates in English Education. It is described in the course catalog as an intensive course on “topics selected by the instructor for specialized study” that “may be repeated for credit as topics vary.”

Kwame Dawes has published eight collections of poetry, several books of scholarship, fiction, and plays. He is a professor of English at the University of South Carolina, where he directs the USC Poetry Initiative, a poetry outreach and research center.

Christy Friend is an assistant professor at the University of South Carolina, where she teaches courses in rhetoric and composition. Her work has recently appeared in *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory and Rhetoric Review*, and she is a co-author of *The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers.*

*Composition Studies, Volume 31, Number 2, Fall 2003*
Syllabus

Teaching Creative Writing: Theories and Practice

The Course

Are you a poet or fiction writer eager to share your craft with others? A composition teacher interested in expanding your courses to incorporate creative writing? Or a scholar curious about the nature of creativity and the differences between writing an academic essay and composing a poem? These are just a few of the issues we’ll explore in this course.

Team-taught by a member of the creative writing faculty (Kwame Dawes) and a member of the composition and rhetoric faculty (Christy Friend), this course will offer a broad-ranging introduction to theories, research, and methods of teaching creative writing. We’ve designed the course not just to prepare you to teach fiction and poetry in various settings, but also to give you an opportunity to engage in serious discussion about the larger theoretical, aesthetic, and pedagogical contexts that shape the teaching of creative writing. You’ll have a chance to try out the ideas we discuss: As part of your work in the course, you’ll teach one or more workshops in a classroom or community venue and reflect on that experience with your classmates.

Major Assignments:

- A course portfolio containing several projects:
  1. A retrospective cover letter reflecting on and assessing your work during the semester (3-5 pages; 10% of course grade).
  2. 3 short reaction papers to course readings (15% of course grade).
  3. Short, weekly creative writing exercises (10% of course grade).
  4. A teaching unit for a creative writing course or series of individual creative writing workshops, created with a particular venue in mind. The unit will consist of an introduction that grounds your materials in relevant theory or research; lesson plans, handouts, and other class materials; and one or more samples of student work with your comments. Note: You must actually teach your unit or a portion of your unit in a classroom or other site approved by the instructors (15-20 pages; 30% of course grade).
  5. A seminar paper that engages a theoretical, pedagogical, or professional issue related to teaching creative writing (7-12 pages; 25% of course grade).
- An informal oral presentation based on your teaching unit (20 minutes; 10% of course grade).

Course Texts:

- Course packet of additional articles*

Grading

You’ll receive a letter grade in the course, based on your course portfolio and your oral presentation. We’ll pick up assignments on their due dates and write comments on them, and we’ll be happy to discuss your progress whenever you like—but we won’t put a final grade on anything until you turn in your portfolio at the end of the term. This system will give you time to refine each piece, so that you can leave this class with a polished portfolio of teaching materials that you can build on throughout your teaching career.

Teaching Requirement

The teaching unit assignment requires that you actually teach some or all of the materials you design. If you’re already teaching at a school or university, you might arrange to present a workshop or series of workshops there. You might also arrange to offer a creative writing workshop or workshops at a community site or for an organization you’re involved with. Or you might want to inquire about participating in one of the community workshop series sponsored by Split P Soup: Poetry for the Community, an outreach program sponsored by the English department. If you have trouble thinking of a site, we can help—just ask.

Our Schedule

Abbreviations: **P** = Course Packet; books are designated by author. Weekly in-class writing exercises from Behn and Twichell TBA.

WEEK 1: GETTING STARTED

Topics: Why study creative writing pedagogy? Writing about and discussion
of own relationships to creative writing, teaching of writing, writing theory, and research. Sign up for three response papers.

**Readings:** Hugo (1-108), Bishop “Crossing the Lines” (Bishop/Ostrom 181-197).

**WEEK 2: CREATIVE WRITING PROCESSES**

**Topics:** How do creative writers work? Are there identifiable stages in the creative process? Can the findings of creativity research and research on the composing process inform our understanding of creative writing? What teaching strategies help writers to work through these processes?

**Readings:** Czikszentmihalyi (1-20, 51-107); Emig, “Lynn: Portrait of a Twelfth-Grade Writer” and “Writing as a Mode of Learning” (P); Sarbo and Moxley, “Creativity Research and Classroom Practice” (Bishop/Ostrom 133-145).

**WEEK 3: CAN CREATIVE WRITING BE LEARNED? CAN IT BE TAUGHT?**

**Topics:** Who can learn to write creatively? What dimensions of creative composition can be taught? What is the role of the creative writing teacher?

**Readings:** Bizarro, “Reading the Creative Writing Course: The Teacher’s Many Selves” (Bishop/Ostrom 234-248); Yusef Komunyakaa, “Poetry and Inquiry” (P); Hemley, “Teaching Our Uncertainties” (P); Ezra Pound, “A Retrospect” (P).

**WEEK 4: RESPONDING TO AND EVALUATING CREATIVE WRITING**

**Topics:** Writing workshops; benefits and limitations of the workshop model. How should teachers evaluate student writing? How are students affected by criticism? Methods of response and evaluation.

**Readings:** Elbow, “The Teacherless Writing Class” (P); Camoin, “The Workshop and Its Discontents” (Bishop/Ostrom 3-26); “Building a Community of Trust” (Muller 35-55).

**WEEK 5: CREATIVE WRITING AS LITERARY ART**

**Topics:** How does reading influence writing? What should aspiring creative writers read? How important is familiarity with the literary canon? Teaching through imitation and form.

**Readings:** “Rescuing the Canon” (Muller 69-102); Pound, “Reading ABC” (P); Corbett, “Style” (P).

**WEEK 6: CREATIVE WRITING AS THERAPY**

**Topics:** Does creative writing enable writers to work through traumatic or difficult experiences? Should teachers encourage students to write about difficult personal experiences? What approaches help students write about pain and loss? Ethical issues, issues of evaluation.

**Readings:** DeSalvo, “How Writing Can Help Us Heal” (P); Berman, “Risky Writing” and “Seeing Ourselves Through the Eyes of Others” (P); Domina, “The Body of My Work Is Not Just a Metaphor” (Bishop/Ostrom 27-34).

**WEEK 7: CREATIVE WRITING AS SOCIOPOLITICAL ACTIVITY**

**Topics:** What social, political, and community functions does creative writing serve? Teaching creative writing outside school; model projects.

**Readings:** Green, “Materializing the Sublime Reader” (P); “Personal and Political Power in Poetry” and “Reaching Inward and Outward Through Poetry” (Muller 157-176, 191-231); Kendig, “Teaching Creative Writing in Prison” (Bishop/Ostrom 158-166).

**WEEK 8: NO CLASS. INDIVIDUAL MIDTERM CONFERENCES**

Sign up for an individual conference. By the end of this week you should have developed a general plan for your teaching unit and chosen a site.

**WEEK 9: TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING TO CHILDREN**

**Topics:** How do children learn to write creatively? What works with different age groups? Why incorporate creative writing into the elementary school curriculum? How does creative writing help children learn?

**Readings:** Koch (1-337); Cowan, “The Arts and Emergent Literacy” (P).

**WEEK 10: TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING TO ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS**

**Topics:** How can teachers encourage middle- and high-school students to write creatively? What do young people learn from writing creatively? What methods and exercises work best with this age group?

**Readings:** In-class screening of Shirley Brice Heath’s ArtShow; Judith Rowe Michaels’s, “Risking Intensity” and “Writing Your Own Poem” (P).

**WEEK 11: CREATIVE WRITING IN COLLEGE—UNDERGRADS AND MFAs**

**Oral Presentations**

**Topics:** Why is it that most college-level creative writing instruction happens in MFA programs? History, strengths, and limitations of the MFA model. Trends in teaching creative writing at the undergraduate level.

**Readings:** Bishop, “Afterword” (Bishop/Ostrom 280-308); Fenza, “Creative Writing and Its Discontents” (P); Maisello, “It’s Okay to Be Creative: A Role for the Imagination in Basic Writing Courses” (Bishop/Ostrom 208-216).
WEEK 12: TAKING CREATIVE WRITING PUBLIC—READINGS AND ANTHOLOGIES

Oral Presentations; Draft of Seminar Paper Due

Topics: Importance of public readings, publication, and other public “products” to a creative writing course or workshop; model programs; putting together a student reading or publication.

Readings: “Word of Mouth: Staging a Revolutionary Reading” and “Throwing it Down (On Paper, In a Book)” (Muller 135-148, 177-190); Chihak, “Success is in the Details: Publishing to Validate Elementary Authors” (P).

WEEK 13: PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

Oral Presentations

Topics: Who teaches creative writing? Who should teach it? Can working creative writers be happy as school or university teachers? How should teachers of creative writing be trained? What’s the relationship between composition specialists and creative writing specialists?

Readings: Kostelhantz, “Teaching and the ‘Alternative’ Writer” (P); Lardner, et al., “Composition and Creative Writing” (P).

WEEK 14 (11/26, 11/28): PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

Oral Presentations

Topics: Professional opportunities and obstacles for creative writing teachers; trends in creative writing programs and courses; publishing and job market concerns.

Readings: Ritter, “Professional Writers/Writing Professionals: Revamping Teacher Training in Creative Writing Ph.D. Programs” (P).

WEEK 15 (12/3, 12/5): FINAL CONNECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Oral Presentations; course evaluations

Topics: Final reflections and questions.

Readings: No readings this week; work on polishing your portfolio.

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CRITICAL STATEMENT

In the past few years, specialists in creative writing and composition have called for increased collaboration between the two fields. Recent theme issues of College English and CCC, at least one book (Bishop and Ostrom), and several articles in The Writer's Chronicle (see Fenza, Hemley, Lott) have explored topics like creative writing pedagogy, the teaching of creative nonfiction, and intersections between composition theory and creative writing. Many of these discussions call attention to values and practices our fields share. For example, George Kalamaras believes that despite institutional histories that separate us, creative writing and composition nonetheless hold “a common position in relation to a shared object—the study, practice, and teaching of writing” (77). AWP Director D.W. Fenza agrees that, especially at the undergraduate
level, creative writing and composition courses have similar goals; both teach students “critical reading skills, the elements of craft, general persuasive writing skills, and an appreciation for literary works” (68).

Other discussions center on what teachers in the two fields might learn from each other. Kelly Ritter suggests that creative writing programs might emulate composition programs’ models for training and mentoring novice instructors (220). Tim Mayers adds that composition theory could inform creative writing courses by calling attention to sociopolitical dimensions of literacy that fiction and poetry workshops often neglect (83). By the same token, Wendy Bishop argues that creative writers possess valuable resources for teaching craft and style—elements of writing currently out of vogue in composition scholarship (“Suddenly” 263). She further recommends that first-year composition curricula expand their purview to encompass creative genres as well as academic ones, contending that students would find such courses more engaging and more relevant (“Suddenly” 265).

Implicit in all these scholars’ remarks is a manifesto for change—a call for composition and creative writing programs to cross institutional and disciplinary borders, to collapse distinctions that have outlived their usefulness, and to capitalize on the complementary resources our different traditions offer. Yet despite these rich possibilities, few collaborative courses or programs have materialized. Why? Harriet Malinowitz suspects that the fault lies on both sides. Many creative writing programs harbor “an elite literary aesthetic” that dismisses composition specialists as “intellectual lightweights or mere technicians” (313), while many compositionists’ passion for postmodern and critical theories leaves them skeptical of modes of engagement with language—like creative writing—that foreground imagination, artistry, and pleasure (315). Just as important as these attitudinal obstacles is the general lack of institutional support for such collaborations: there are few precedents for cross-disciplinary work, “little encouragement to risk it, and no guidelines for how to do it well” (Malinowitz 312).

Though the lack of established precedents can make cross-disciplinary efforts seem risky, it also leaves an open field for experimentation. Our team-taught graduate course, “Teaching Creative Writing: Theories and Practices” (TCR), is one such experiment. We teach in a large, academically diverse English department which houses both a large MFA program in creative writing (in which Kwame, a poet and full professor, teaches) and a Ph.D. major in composition and rhetoric (in which Christy, an assistant professor, teaches), in addition to Ph.D. majors in American and British literature. Since graduate students in our department frequently take courses in a variety of fields, overlapping interests and informal collaborations among students from different majors—especially among composition and creative writing students—are the norm. MFA students frequently take courses in composition theory and find jobs teaching composition after graduation, students in both majors teach community poetry workshops in conjunction with a departmental community outreach program, and several composition students are preparing dissertations related to creative writing instruction. We believed that an interdisciplinary seminar on creative writing pedagogy would provide a space to extend the conversations and collaborative projects already underway and to more rigorously explore connections between our two fields.

Keeping in mind the hierarchies, oppositions, and exclusions that Bishop and Malinowitz warn can derail conversations between creative writers and compositionists, we built into the course design several features that we hoped would maximize opportunities for constructive interdisciplinary exchanges:

- **Team-teaching:** It was important to us that the course be team-taught by a member of the composition faculty and a member of the creative writing faculty. Team teaching, we hoped, would acquaint students with perspectives from both fields, giving each field equal time and equal value. To recruit a similarly diverse student population, we offered the course under a “topics” designation that would count as elective credit for master’s and doctoral students majoring in literature, composition and rhetoric, creative writing, or English education.

- **Interdisciplinary reading:** Mindful of Bishop’s recommendation that creative writers and compositionists learn more about each other’s work, we sought out readings that offered an interdisciplinary range of material on teaching creative writing, including articles on composition research and theory, essays by creative writers, articles by K-12 educators and social service professionals, empirical research on creativity, and teaching materials from interesting creative writing programs around the country. We hoped that this diversity would broaden students’ understanding beyond the training and experiences they had received in their major fields.

- **Varied Writing Assignments:** We required that every student, regardless of his or her major, craft and submit both creative and scholarly projects: every student completed a small portfolio of poems, designed lesson plans, and researched and wrote an academic seminar paper. While this format created a relatively heavy workload, we felt it was vital for an interdisciplinary course to push students to work both within and outside of their comfort zones. We also wanted to ensure that the course would acknowledge a full range of genres and modes of inquiry.
Teaching component: Finally, we wanted everyone in the class to develop and actually teach creative writing lessons at sites of their choice. This practical component, we hoped, would build students’ confidence in their teaching abilities and would illustrate that different combinations of skills and approaches are useful in different teaching settings.

Most of all, we wanted the course to embody a rich mix of theories, research, and practice that would help students draw on the resources of both composition and creative writing to approach their writing and their teaching in more thoughtful ways.

Statement of Locale

In addition to these broad pedagogical influences, TCR responded to several ongoing needs on our campus. The course provided professional development for several groups of students:

- Graduate Students in Composition and Rhetoric: Recent MLA-sponsored reports have called for graduate programs to broaden students’ pedagogical training beyond preparation to teach first-year composition (ctd. in Ritter 208.) This need is especially pressing for departments like ours, whose Ph.D. graduates typically take jobs at small, regional colleges where they will teach a wide range of courses—including courses in creative writing. Our department already offered pedagogy courses in composition, literature, and business and technical writing. TCR seemed like a logical next step in this direction. The course broadened students’ teaching credentials to include creative writing as well as experience with community outreach. It also introduced them to a new research area in composition—one that, as Wendy Bishop has noted, is ripe for scholarly investigation (“Places” 29).

- MFA Creative Writing Students: Creative writing graduates face one of the toughest job markets in the academy (Ritter 233). Yet until TCR, our MFA students had little opportunity to develop teaching credentials or to study the theoretical and pedagogical literature in their field. Because most teaching assistantships in the department are used to staff first-year composition, MFA students rarely get a chance to teach creative writing courses on campus; TCR, we hoped, could give them some substantive academic and practical preparation for teaching in their specialty—preparation that we hoped would enhance their qualifications on the job market.

- English Education Students and Practicing K-12 Teachers: Since the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (the standardized achievement test required of all public-school students in South Carolina) added a writing component two years ago, English Education students and practicing K-12 teachers in our area have become quite interested in finding innovative ways to teach writing. Our university’s MAT and MT programs currently offer little coursework in this area: teachers in training must take 18 credit hours of graduate literature courses but no required graduate courses in composition and rhetoric. TCR was thus a useful elective for these students.

Community Needs

As the only English department with a Ph.D. major in composition and rhetoric and the only MFA creative writing program in South Carolina, our university educates some of the state’s most talented writers and a large proportion of the state’s writing teachers. We thus saw TCR as not only contributing to the training of teachers who might eventually take jobs in the area, but also as creating immediate opportunities for community members to build relationships with writers and teachers at the university. The mid-sized capital city where our campus is located presents many opportunities for outreach since widespread poverty, inadequate educational and social service funding, and a history of class and racial segregation deprive many area residents of ongoing access to literacy and arts enrichment. The city’s largest school district, where several TCR students conducted their teaching projects, serves an academically and economically disadvantaged population that is predominantly African-American, with more than 70% of the students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches. All these factors created a receptive environment for TCR.

Looking Back

Reflecting on TCR six months later, we are pleased that it achieved most of our goals: students studied an interdisciplinary range of texts on teaching creative writing, they applied these materials in crafting and conducting community writing workshops, and several identified long-term research and teaching interests as a result of projects they began in the course. However, like most new courses, TCR was problematic in a number of ways—not least because the diverse perspectives the course set in motion often clashed. In the sections that follow, we present separately Kwame’s and Christy’s comments on these positive and negative dimensions since Kwame is more attuned to the experiences of the MFA students in the course and to how our discussions resonated in the larger context of the MFA program, while Christy’s sense of the course is tied more closely to the fields of composition and English education.
CHRISTY'S COMMENTS: REFLECTIONS FROM THE COMPOSITIONIST

I was delighted on the first day of class to discover that the TCR students came from all three majors we hoped to attract: six Ph.D. students in composition and rhetoric, six MFA students, and two MT students from English Education. Unfortunately, it quickly became apparent that our plans for the course were better suited to some students' needs than to others'. For example, many had enrolled primarily to learn about teaching fiction and creative nonfiction, whereas we had geared the syllabus towards the teaching of poetry. We had reasoned that the emphasis on poetry played to our strengths: Kwanie publishes in several genres but most often teaches poetry workshops, and most of my own creative writing experience involved teaching poetry to children. However, several students, especially the MFA students specializing in fiction and those non-MFA students who had never written much poetry, felt that we were sidestepping their interests. Composition students especially voiced a desire for more material on teaching creative nonfiction, arguing that since this genre is often seen as one that bridges creative writing and composition (Rout 251), it would have been a more appropriate focus for a course serving students from both majors. This coverage gap was partly filled later in the term by three students who created teaching units and did informative oral presentations on creative nonfiction. A fourth student wrote a seminar paper on currently available creative writing textbooks. The class's positive response to these projects convinced me that we must do justice to a broader range of genres when we teach the course again, perhaps by incorporating guest lecturers who specialize in fiction, creative nonfiction, and drama.

We also underestimated the degree to which some students expected the course to focus strictly on practical issues—on prescribing teaching materials, classroom strategies, and expert advice that they could take directly into their teaching. Despite our course description that clearly articulated the course's interdisciplinary aims, these students felt that how-to instruction was the proper aim of a "teaching" course and sometimes saw theoretical and pedagogical reflections as intrusions. As one anonymous midterm evaluation put it, "I am frustrated by the conversations that go in circles about things like who can teach creative writing, what constitutes good writing, and how to evaluate writing. We will never come to an agreement on these questions, so we should focus our attention on the practical aspects of the classroom." In another student's words, "I see the value of raising assumptions that underlie our teaching, but it seems important to come, if not to a perfect consensus, at least to some general sense of a range of good choices to apply in our teaching."

Because we never intended to design a "methods" course and had made this clear in the syllabus, I took some of the students' frustration in stride.

Nonetheless, I had to come to terms with the fact that I had overestimated some students' interest in and preparation for grappling with extended theoretical explorations. Because I teach mostly Ph.D.-level courses for composition graduate students who intend to do scholarly and theoretical work, I had lost touch with the fact that the courses I was accustomed to were not necessarily the kinds of courses that master's level students in education and creative writing—for whom methods courses or writing workshops were the norm—found familiar or self-evidently worthwhile. Because Kwame and I agreed that we want the course to include students from these master's programs, and because in the future we hope to attract local K-12 teachers as well, we will need to deal with these expectations. Possible solutions might include spending an early class session talking explicitly about the relationship between theory and practice; beginning the practically-oriented assignments earlier in the semester; and setting aside more time to draw conclusions (even if that conclusion is only that several competing viewpoints have emerged), so that students don't feel that the course lacks direction.

These glitches in the syllabus are easily fixed; more difficult were the tensions that emerged among the students—especially between MFA and non-MFA students. This division took me by surprise. I had taught nearly all the students before in composition courses, knew many of them well, and had seen several of them collaborate happily on other projects. Forgetting that these previous courses had stayed within traditional disciplinary boundaries, I didn't anticipate that in this class the stakes would change. The trouble started in the third week of the term, when our scheduled discussion topics included whether creativity can be taught and who should teach creative writing. Several MFA students spoke in favor of the "master poet/apprentice" model traditionally favored in creative writing programs, positing that in most cases, only a published creative writer can understand enough about the dynamics of the creative process to effectively teach it. Another MFA student suggested that perhaps a "sliding-scale" model would be appropriate: non-specialists might appropriately teach creative writing to children and beginners, but older and more talented students should be taught by published writers.

None of these students intended to sound dismissive; unfortunately, these sorts of statements hurt the feelings of some non-MFA students in the course, who inferred that their MFA classmates perceived them as unqualified to be part of the group. (Ironically, several of these non-MFA students also seemed to implicitly embrace the "master poet" ideal, expressing considerable anxiety about whether they—as "non-poets"—could teach poetry.) One or two of the composition students voiced opposition to these assumptions, citing research on writing processes and pointing to similarities between creative writing and composition teaching. One student argued that teaching writing
effectively involves more or less the same strategies across genres and therefore teaching creative writing demands pretty much the same expertise as teaching first-year composition—a position that some MFA students felt devalued their own training in the program. The debate quickly polarized into MFA and non-MFA camps without moving beyond the initial disagreement. In the aftermath, many of the non-MFA students felt increasingly unwilling to share their poems in progress, and more than one MFA student approached me to ask why the non-MFAs were being so sensitive. The class atmosphere for a significant portion of the semester was quite uncomfortable.

Both Kwame and I failed to foresee the degree to which we and our students would be unable to avoid reproducing the conflicting aesthetics, values, and pedagogical perspectives of the traditions in which we’d been trained. For my part, I naively believed that because we valued collaboration, asked students to read across specialty fields, and wanted them to get along, the biases shaped by our backgrounds would disappear. We were both, I think, shocked that the “genius writer/apprentice” model of teaching—which we were trying to move past—reared its head so often in our class discussions. In future courses, we should attempt to deflect these tensions from the very beginning. Clearly, the question of “Who should teach creative writing?” should not be raised near the beginning of the semester, before students feel comfortable in the group. Rather, community-building activities—perhaps in the form of informal assignments that require MFA and non-MFA students to work together—should be a central component of early class meetings. And Kwame and I continue to talk about how we can better manage situations in which words like “genius,” “professional creative writer,” “expertise,” and “talent” are thrown around in ways that may hurt feelings and stifle discussion.

Upsetting as these tensions were, they had largely resolved themselves by the end of the term, when the group began to present the results of their teachng projects. Because we had encouraged each student to design a project that reflected his or her interests and background, most were excited to begin teaching and quickly made themselves experts on the sites and assignments they’d chosen. They developed a range of projects that we found stunning in their diversity and sophistication. For example:

- One MFA student developed and taught a weekly poetry class for residents at a local women’s halfway house. Along the way, she did considerable research on the relationships between trauma, healing, and creative writing, including materials from the social sciences and criminal justice publications. She continues to teach at the site and is considering writing her dissertation on this topic.
- One composition student, who initially felt anxious about her qualifications to teach poetry writing, was intrigued by Kenneth Koch’s work suggesting that many young children respond powerfully to complex “classic” poems. She created a series of lessons on Edgar Allen Poe and Robert Frost that she presented at a local elementary school. The fifth-grade students she worked with eventually composed and “published” for their classroom library a lengthy narrative poem based on poetic techniques used in Poe’s “The Raven.”
- Another composition student drew on theories describing the relationship between language, space, and movement to devise “Poetry in Motion” workshops combining poetry writing and dance for teenage girls, which she offered at a local library.
- An MFA student borrowed several assignments from composition textbooks and adapted them for an undergraduate creative writing workshop in our department, eventually writing a paper that was accepted for publication.

The fact that every student received positive responses at their teaching sites—and, in many cases, invitations to return and teach more workshops—built the confidence of even the most anxious members of the group. Further, because each student shared with the class the lessons he or she had developed, the assignment fostered mutual respect and appreciation. And because students chose such a challenging range of teaching sites, they felt it increasingly necessary to do the kind of interdisciplinary reading and research that some had initially resisted. Staunch MFA traditionalists found themselves reading about how social workers teach creative writing, and composition students who decrified the “genius poet” model found that Richard Hugo nonetheless offered useful suggestions for the classroom. In short, what the inadequacies in our syllabus had damaged, the teaching assignments seemed largely to repair. By the end of the term, the group again seemed collegial, students seemed pleased with their work, the course evaluations were generally positive, and nearly all students had produced excellent projects.

Kwame’s Response: Reflections from the Creative Writer

At the beginning of the course, I was perhaps more conscious than Christy that the work we were doing went against accepted wisdom in creative writing programs. The resistance among many in my field to graduate courses that seek to teach students how to teach creative writing is, in some ways, understandable. After all, some think, the best teachers of creative writing are good creative writers themselves. Teaching creative writing is an art form that must be reserved for those who are talented. To think that graduate students enrolled in MFA or composition and rhetoric graduate programs, thousands of them, are going to be qualified to teach creative writing is pure presumption. They feel that the professionalization of teaching of composition and rhetoric
should be kept as far away as possible from the teaching of creative writing. Composition and rhetoric, their thinking goes, are technical entities. Creative writing is Art.

This argument may seem trite, easily challenged, and devoid of any real merit. We should keep these objections to a course like TCR in mind, though, because those who hold to the view that the best teachers of creative writing are those who are the most successful writers are the majority in my field. And they have good reason to believe this: the entire university system of hiring writers to teach in MFA programs is premised on the extent of their success as writers. Students are attracted to creative writing programs because of the success of the writers employed to teach in them. There is a dogged belief that learning from a “master” poet or fiction writer is elemental to becoming a successful poet or fiction writer. The concept holds true in many of the fine and performing arts. People assume the value of working with the best singers, the best musicians, the best painters and sculptors, the best actors and directors, don’t they? Well, sort of. Still, we do know that the best acting coaches often can’t act to save their lives. How many great actors have you heard name their acting coaches and you say, “Who?” People accept that an acting coach does not need to be a great actor. He or she does need to know how to teach acting, and his or her credibility is based on the work of the actors whom he or she has taught. The same is true of voice coaches, those who teach musical instrumentalists, and so on. Yet people in my field, including some of the students enrolled in our course, tend to be far more skeptical of “writing coaches” who have not done great writing themselves. Is this reasonable?

TCR, among other things, helped me and these students think through this complicated question. Looking back on the course, I am inclined to think that there are at least two legitimate kinds of teachers of creative writing and that writers can learn different things from them. There may be times when a writer benefits from working with a senior writer—a mentor. This sort of teacher serves as a model, a road-tested guide who can identify old traps and teach from experience. This writer understands the business side of writing and the emotional challenge of working through blocks and anxieties. At the same time, there is another kind of writing teacher who is essentially a gifted coach, who has studied the business of craft and excels at guiding writers towards developing this craft. These teachers are credible insofar as they are known to be astute, responsive readers and guides. They must have a solid understanding of the writing process and the factors that shape a writer’s work in different genres.

The thing is that regardless of what type of teacher we are dealing with, his or her success rides not so much on publication credentials but on teaching skills. These skills, I am convinced, can be learned and ought to be learned. The writing workshop is a place in which the complexities of group dynamics and collaborative learning are played out. The business of generating writing—invention—is one that is prompted by many different approaches: exercises, feedback, interactions in the classroom, and so on. These things can be learned. These things can be and are the subjects of scholarship and research—much of it done in the fields of composition and rhetoric. If we believe that good teachers can be trained, then we must believe that good creative writing teachers can be trained.

Having said all this, what should be clear is that the pedagogy of teaching creative writing is in desperate need of critical attention. This is why we taught TCR as we did. We taught it because we felt that it would be exceptional for students to look seriously at the scholarship surrounding the pedagogy of creative writing teaching and of the teaching of writing in general. The reason is simple: we need to be able to see how these two things depart from each other and where they can supplement and enrich each other.

If we had any doubts that this process was absolutely necessary, we understood it as soon as we began to teach the course. The fissures between the creative writers and the composition and English education students were great. Many assumptions and fascinating perspectives had to be brought to the table and explored with care and with respect. While the process was difficult at times, this is the kind of thing that makes a graduate program a dynamic place. We were embarking on a new dialogue and guiding a way toward a course that both taught some fundamental principles of creative writing pedagogy and offered a context for serious scholarly study of the theories and ideas surrounding this area of interest.

The students in the MFA program who took the course have learned a great deal about the business of teaching creative writing. They have left the course with a sense that what they are doing has credible pedagogical and scholarly grounding. They have also managed to write poems, stories, and a few papers on theory and pedagogy in the process. But they have also recognized that in the world outside the MFA workshop, they must work with other teachers and scholars of writing who will be able to teach them a great deal about the dynamics of pedagogy—things that they would never learn if they did not have this kind of dialogue. I am convinced that this same positive prognosis can be found among those students who do not regard themselves primarily as “creative writers.” It is at this most basic level that I believe our effort was a success.

CONCLUSION

As a compositionist and a creative writer who have weathered this experiment with designing an interdisciplinary graduate course in teaching
creative writing, we believe that TCR was well worth the time and energy we put into it. We look forward to honing the syllabus as we teach the course in future semesters and to further exploring the connections between creative writing and composition studies—not in order to collapse distinctions between our fields, but to capitalize on the rich intersections between them. As one of the end-of-term student evaluations put it, the course “fostered interesting and sometimes problematic (in a mostly good way) intersections between writing, teaching, aesthetics, principles of communication, and more. In essence: interdisciplinarity.”

Columbia, South Carolina

WORKS CITED


