WHICH PART OF THE ELEPHANT IS THIS?:
QUESTIONING CREATIVE NON-FICTION IN THE WRITING MAJOR

On a sun-filled morning in the fall of 2004, our writing faculty eagerly gathered to craft our own major. We began by bandying about ideas for required courses. Someone suggested a 200 level course, along the lines of an “Introduction to the Profession.” And then . . . a sudden schism.

In the tense debate that followed, some faculty argued that varieties of public, community, and workplace writing should be the sole focus of such a core course in a composition program, while others explained that creative nonfiction deserved inclusion as a legitimate part of “professional writing.” The disagreement was not resolved in that meeting and continues, in some ways, to this day. Why? We believe that part of the answer may be historical, but for writing programs that are developing a major, the issue is more fruitfully focused on the theoretical and conceptual issues.

At some institutions, creative writing has been housed in English Departments or in its own department or program, a set of circumstances that has allowed—or forced—compositionists to conceive of a “full” slate of writing courses without such classes. In the meantime, mainstream composition scholarship has focused on social theory, critical theory, and the development of writing courses informed by these theories. In these circumstances, any writing course preceded by the word “creative” or “expressive” or “imaginative” might be criticized as being a-social, a-political, and a-rhetorical, which situates the debate over the rightful “home” of such courses squarely in the middle of the writing program rather than between writing and English (or some other program).

In our program, while still questioning whether and how to integrate creative nonfiction into our writing major, we followed one line of reasoning that might be called Rogerian in its attempt to establish consensus. We developed a course called “Writing in the Expressivist Tradition,” which
recognizes expressivism as part of Composition’s history and ties such a course particularly to the writing of creative nonfiction. While this line of thought helped create a space for a “creative” course in our program, it also relegates expressivism to an historical moment rather than to the conceiving of such a course or way of writing as integral to a well-rounded writing major.

Other “Rogerian” approaches are available. For example, Chris Anderson examines nonfiction texts for their rhetorical elements, while Mary Ann Cain and George Kalamaris focus on the rhetorical in writers’ workshops. Their scholarship focuses on the rhetorical in the teaching and writing of creative nonfiction. Another intriguing approach invokes activity theory. Robert A. Schwegler reasons that if the ability to be a “writing agent” in a field calls for “particular knowledge, expertise and social experience,” then there is fertile ground for a writing course (31). Schwegler’s approach leads to courses that blend workplace, political, and creative nonfiction writing in the same course syllabus. For example, a course about the rhetoric and discursive practices of disabilities includes critical essays about disabilities narratives, public policy papers, and pieces of creative nonfiction.

Clearly, we see several possibilities for the teaching of creative nonfiction that make room for such courses amongst other writing or composition courses. However, unless we compositionists can easily and clearly explain the conceptual and theoretical connections between creative nonfiction and, say, business communications, any writing course with the label “creative,” could remain a schismatic problem for writing programs, especially those with writing majors.

WORKS CITED
Cain, Mary Ann, and George Kalamaris. “Taking the Rhetorical Turn in Advanced Creative Writing.” Shamoon et al. 131-32.
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