

## **Using Creative Writing to Engage Students in a General Education Course**

**Author: Stephen Johnson, English**

**Summary:** An English professor incorporates creative writing assignments coupled with research and analysis into an undergraduate course in order to facilitate more active and engaged student learning.

### **Background**

English 210: Introduction to Poetry is an option for fulfilling the third and final requirement in the first- and second-year English program. Nearly all students earning their undergraduate degrees at KU must complete this sequence of classes, so the vast majority are non-English majors. A few years ago the enrollment cap for these classes was 35, but recently the cap has been 25 or lower, a more manageable number considering these are writing intensive courses and so require a heavy reading and evaluation load on my part. I teach Introduction to Poetry regularly and spent the Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 semesters redesigning coursework to include a significant creative writing component that would complement the existing research component.

The first- and second-year English classes are not lecture courses; they focus rather on a process-oriented approach to writing generated from discussion, skills-building exercises, and workshops. I believe I have successfully developed a curriculum that teaches this approach to English 101 and 102 students; in fact, 20% of their semester grade depends on attendance, class participation, and many informal—meaning low stakes—writing assignments. In my Introduction to Poetry course, however, I had lightened up on these process-oriented requirements because first, I thought students might feel condescended to — they had already been through all this, right? — and second, I wanted to use class time to cover much more literature, and in my classes that meant going heavy on discussion.

That approach, with little attention paid to the writing process, was not working as indicated by the essays that came out, especially early in the semester, as typical analysis papers that formulated a thesis and then generated an answer. But the majority of the papers were simply that, answers that solved a poem's mystery, and in just 500 words — exactly what most students believe all teachers of literature want. So I had to read essays that were often without individual investment or a creative and vital exchange between the reader and the poem. In a sense, the essays were lifeless.

## Implementation

**Getting Started:** Poetry is terrifying to many, as we may recall from our own introductions to it in elementary or junior high school, and, yes, many students bring those anxieties and fears with them to college. What do they fear? Here are just a few of the student answers I hear every semester: “Poetry’s so . . . *abstract*.” “I just don’t get it.” “I don’t want to get the *wrong answer*.” Inwardly I groan every time I hear these concerns but have learned to be far more empathetic. Understandably, students are under a tremendous amount of pressure to make good grades while being confronted with a discipline utterly foreign to them and expected — or so they think — to perform like trained professionals.

**Curiosity and Play:** The semester is broken into four sections, the first of which is devoted to making students more comfortable with poetry while preparing them to incorporate creativity into their critical thinking. The first section of the semester is meant to get the students and the poem out of the classroom and onto the playground of curiosity and play. Yes, play — in academia. The great secret many students could benefit from learning is that academics do what they do in a spirit of play and joy and curiosity, at least initially. Why can’t students ask playful, meaningful questions of poems like we do? Must they be consigned/resigned, as Billy Collins says, to “beating every poem with a rubber hose”?

Often it seems so. Early homework assignments are designed to supplement our class discussions of poems. For example, in one assignment students are asked to record uses of figurative language they hear outside the English classroom and to pay particular attention to professors in other areas of study. They are often surprised by how many examples they collect of non-English professors being “poetic.” Another assignment calls for them to rewrite one of our poems for discussion, their goal being to eliminate all uses of figurative language. The most literal and therefore worst poem submitted wins.

By playing around with the poem and being creative, or, as with this rewrite of a published poem, un-creative, students explore the process behind composition instead of just the product. I see no difference between a general perception of students that poets are really smart or exceptionally creative people who write poems with ease and professional essayists who do not undergo similar trials of hair-wrenching decision making.

**Process Versus Product:** Teaching this class every year, I observed that one of the major skills we try to teach in the first two required courses (English 101 and 102), using writing as a cumulative process in problem-solving (which includes a vital creative writing component), falls off dramatically. In earlier classes I had built that cumulative process into the assignment sequence, supporting the process. For years I had assumed, I think to some extent subconsciously, that by completing the prerequisites students had not only learned those skills but had earned the right not to be overly policed on their way to a product.

Perhaps I was naïve or hopeful, or both. I often found that papers not only showed signs of being written the night before, but, even worse, they were written to meet what they thought were the typical expectations for just one more literary analysis for one more literature class—simply to jump through that hoop.

To solve this problem I designed many small homework assignments, mostly micro-themed responses, due long before the formal essays were due. By the time students were working on papers that would have a significant impact on their grades, they had already generated a considerable body of work. Moreover, these responses were far more likely to reflect genuine readings of the poems rather than regurgitated material from online sources for this very important reason: in these low-stakes assignments they are encouraged to ask questions, share what they do not know, or are utterly confused by, with me and the class. In fact, during class discussion I am sure to praise these kinds of explorations in ignorance. Even better, I have found that in small group discussions students willingly tackle difficult questions together.

**Decoding the Discipline — Reorienting the Students:** Poetry has no relevance to students' academic interests. Poets might as well be aliens sitting under alien trees and dreaming alien dreams, and that is not the worst. These aliens spend all their time thinking about clever ways to use rhyme and alliteration. In fact, it is all they care about. My goal early on in that first part of the semester is to take the alien-ness out of what poets do and why they do it.

Early reading, writing, and thinking about poetry are meant to be playful. In the series of micro-themed papers I use ask students to consider how poets play with language. What are they doing to be creative and have fun with language? What poems do you simply like because of their sound, their look? These kinds of natural questions (I say *natural* because students answer these kinds of questions every day, about songs, movies, commercials, and signs) are then followed by more weighty thematic questions.

The thematic questions, however, do not have to be accompanied by a student's answer; rather, they may pose questions, even ones they think unanswerable — all the better, I tell them — to submit to class discussion. I ask them to be creative with their questions and not to worry because they are not required to have an answer. These are low-stakes homework assignments for which they may earn full credit with reasonable effort.

In addition to reorienting the students by introducing them to the play in language, early assignments ask them to identify themes and questions in poems that they come across in other areas of study. The most obvious candidates come from history, women studies, religious studies, political science, philosophy, and art, but the possibilities are limitless and depend entirely on what disciplines motivate the students.

I cannot say the class took an interdisciplinary approach exactly, but my goal was to reorient the reading of poetry and study of literature somewhere among other academic pursuits so that various disciplines could inform each other, and hopefully some of the intellectual curiosity and excitement students experience in their own majors will transfer

to their reading of poetry. I must say I do take pleasure in the irony that part of getting students to move poetry out of an English classroom is asking them to find it in their non-poetry classes.

**Creative Writing Coupled with Research:** The final section and primary creative component of the semester is devoted to close study and research of one or more major works; for example, T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," or an extensive selection of Emily Dickinson's poems.

By this time students have generated their own questions and themes of interest through playful and serious exploration, including having written several poems of their own and having conducted research. In Fall 2011, after completing a group research project and presentation over Eliot's seminal modernist poem, students were asked to write their own waste-land poem and short rationale. The final project invited them to apply individualized thematic interests and an acquired working knowledge of the poets' tools to writing their own waste-land poem.

## **Student Performance and Assessment**

Of course students are not expected to create great works of literature here, and I am perfectly clear in letting them know that projects are not graded according to what I think is good or bad or excellent poetry. Students are expected, however, to demonstrate an understanding of how poets work with sense and sound, theme and poetic devices, and they do so by writing the poem and a rationale that explains their intentions.

Furthermore, while students are required to work within the discipline of literary studies by applying research and analytical skills to their project, they are also encouraged to engage the project from a point of view outside the discipline. These points of view included greek life on campus or students pursuing interior design, environmental studies, history, or micro-biology, all of whom approached their contemporary wasteland project from their respective discipline or interests.

By the end of the semester students more readily moved back and forth between the playful and the academic, between the creative and the analytical. In her essay, "Applying the concept of signature pedagogies to engaged learning," written for CTE's "Teaching Matters," Dena Register asks, "What would happen if we were to connect research and creative endeavors, civic engagement, and global awareness to the general education courses that students take before digging deeper in a specific area of study?" An excellent question that Register asks is answered in a couple of studies: "The principles they outline include active learning, learning as a social process, knowledge as shaped by contexts, reflective practice and capacity to represent an idea in more than one modality" (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont and Stephens 2003).

In addition to developing new assignments with a creative writing component, I created grading rubrics for all the major assignments in order to more clearly define how students may meet assignment goals as well as first- and second-year English curriculum goals.

I looked for the following, which apply specifically to this project:

### According to departmental goals listed above

Ability to compose in a variety of genres (creative, analytical, evaluative, digital, etc.)

Ability to integrate previously held beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge with new information and ideas in the texts

Ability to interpret texts to reveal how language can be used to construct a reality and sometimes to obscure or change reality

### According to new assignment design

Ability to engage poems creatively

Ability to reorient the reading of poetry among other disciplines

## **Reflection**

All too easily instructors can blame students for lackluster performance — I have done so myself, no doubt — and in part it is so easy because we do have those few students who can write essays we yearn for, essays with a pulse. Those student essayists always have and always will grace our classrooms. Either they are exceptionally bright and capable or they are enthusiastic English majors, often times both. While one, sometimes two, students out of 25 — I do not recall ever having three — are indeed English majors, the rest come from, well, everywhere else.

My course re-design was intended for everyone else from everywhere else. Many of these creative assignments invited students to bring to the poem their prior knowledge and experience. While ostensibly I designed assignments to couple creative writing with research in order to teach sound writing skills, I was able to engage more kinds of students, from all the disciplines besides English, in a way that might convince them that literature is relevant to them too, that writers actually are of the same species and share similar concerns. In our mission statement, the English department recognizes itself to be at the “core of the humanities,” and I think these new assignments took that mission seriously and invited students from everywhere else to enter a conversation between their academic disciplines and the study of literature.