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### Can Creative Writing Be Taught? Benefits of the Workshop-Style Writing Class

Creative writing is an underappreciated field of study commonly thought of as a hobby rather than a career choice. As with the other arts, many students are discouraged from the creative writing major by friends and family because of the perceived lack of career opportunities after graduation. However, some of the most prestigious companies in our country are coming to recognize creativity as a unique skill which leads to growth and innovation. This is even true for the ever-expanding tech industry. Steve Jobs explained, while introducing the iPad 2, “It’s in Apple’s DNA that technology alone is not enough...It’s technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields the results that make our hearts sing.” (As cited in Lehrer). English majors are becoming well known in the workforce for having fundamental critical thinking and problem solving skills. As a result, schools are becoming more cognizant of the importance of these skills as they implement new creative writing courses and degree programs. The inclusion of creative arts in Indiana University East’s annual Student Research Day event is one example of such progressive thinking. This opportunity has allowed me to share my poetry with a broader audience (not just my fellow writers), and to share the workshop model with academics in other fields of study who might be able to benefit from similar practices.

Poetry and other creative writing courses are generally quite different from traditional lecture-style courses. Modeled after the Iowa Writers' Workshop methods from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, (Rogers) today's creative writing students gain much of their education from their peers. This often comes as a surprise to those who are unfamiliar with workshop-style classes, but many consider it a very effective format for developing the talent and skills of a creative writer. In these classes, students are introduced to a variety of writing styles. They are given an opportunity for self-reflection, a challenging and competitive learning environment, and a chance to explore new ideas while they each work to find his or her own literary voice.

One of the most popular criticisms of the creative writing classroom model is that true artists cannot be taught. Even the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, the most renowned creative writing workshop in the world, rejects responsibility for its student successes, "The fact that the Workshop can claim as alumni nationally and internationally prominent poets, novelists, and short story writers is, we believe, more the result of what they brought here than of what they gained from us" (As cited in Menand). While some would argue that creative writing can absolutely be taught, like most controversial issues, the truth is probably somewhere in the middle. Great writers are not likely to be made out of poor writers, however *good* writers can certainly be shaped into great writers, and the writing workshop model is the choice teaching method for most creative writing instructors.

Another common criticism of the creative writing workshop, particularly among some instructors, is that classrooms are full of incompetent writers. The UK Independent quotes author and creative writing instructor Hanif Kureishi saying, "A lot of my students just can't tell a story. They can write sentences but they don't know how to make a story go from there all the way through to the end without people dying of boredom in between. It's a difficult thing to do and

it's a great skill to have. Can you teach that? I don't think you can" (As cited in Jones and Clark). Again, there is some truth to this complaint. After all, a writing workshop is a place where student go to learn, and therefore cannot be expected to be strong writers, but does that mean they can't teach? Many creative writers would assert that half the battle of learning to write well is learning what not write.

One benefit of the creative writing workshop is exposure to unique and diverse thought processes. To study the poetry of ten or twenty fellow students is to study ten or twenty different writing styles, voices, perspectives, ideas, successes, and mistakes. This means that over the course of a four-year undergraduate degree program a creative writing student has the opportunity to learn from dozens of teachers. Along with the leadership and guidance of an instructor, this aggregation of experience obtained from other creative writing students, many of whom come into the degree program with a fair amount of talent, skill, and experience in writing and literary criticism, has proven to be a highly effective, perhaps even superior method of educating creative thinkers.

An aptitude for self-analysis is also an essential skill which can be obtained through the workshop process. Learning from other students not only teaches a writer how to evaluate the writing of others, but also how to reflect on his or her own writing. A typical workshop-style poetry class involves students and an instructor sitting in a circle and discussing one student's creative work, and then another, until every student has had his or her work critiqued. Evaluators are expected to point out the strengths and weaknesses of the piece and discuss how it could be improved. During the discussion, students learn how to talk about writing professionally, picking up on the language used by the instructor and the other students as they discuss the work. They also learn how to take criticism professionally; not only developing a thicker skin, but also a

sharper aptitude for determining which advice to take, and which to throw away. One might consider the students a test sample while the writer develops a better understanding of the literary expectations of the world outside of the classroom experience. They begin to ask themselves questions such as: “How can I implement this type of irony in *my* poetry?” or “How might *I* use less exposition and more active language in *my* writing?”

Another important, though less talked about, benefit of the writing workshop is competition. An inevitable response to the open-criticism approach in the classroom, competition is a valuable element in the training of creative thinkers. It inspires students to take as much as they can from the classroom experience—to push past their own insecurities and strive to become stronger writers and original thinkers. Not only does it prepare students for the publishing world (which is highly competitive), but students who strive to be better are more likely to become involved in extracurricular activities, including clubs, events, internships, and study abroad. Such activities not only provide the student with valuable experience and often financial support, but they also help build the student’s resume, which opens them up to greater education and career opportunities.

Creative writing workshops in the academic setting also encourage writers to do perhaps the most important thing for writers to do—practice. Writing is challenging, but becoming a writer is absolutely daunting. During the process of growth, every writer eventually, and reluctantly, must learn that he or she will have to write a great deal of crap in order to learn how to create quality writing. This is something young writing and literature students learn quickly before deciding to switch majors. Therefore, it is those capable of enduring the heavy workload and harsh criticism of the creative writing major, and who are willing to struggle and suffer due a genuine love for literature and writing, that end up in 300-level and beyond creative writing

courses. While creative writing students do spend a great deal of time learning from other students, they learn from some of the most dedicated, intelligent, creative, and well-read students in the school. This is something I can personally attest to in my experience as an English major at IU East. I proudly consider my poetry to be a culmination of my own dedication and creativity, and that of my classmates, who shared with me their own unique interpretations of what a poem can become.

### Bruxism

one

I bit my tongue again; the blood tastes like rust. Still jarred by the nightmare I was torn from—driving all my possessions in a U-Haul truck to southern Kentucky to live with a crazy cat family, amongst hordes of skinny, inbred pussies, all shapes and sizes, lounging on furniture, hiding in air vents, breeding and birthing in every dark corner of every room I enter—I slip out of bed, careful not to wake my snoring husband. In the hotel bathroom mirror I see my chapped, blood-stained lips, my bedhead, and my face, puffy and pink.

two

On top of the toilet seat lid sits my husband's precious bitch-of-a-cat preening like an Egyptian princess, staring at me, expressionless. I splash water on my face then turn and hiss through bloody teeth, she licks her paw.

three

I bought a cheap night guard at the drugstore before we left for Indiana because I'd rather bite off my tongue and swallow it than spend two grand on the custom job my dentist recommends. It feels invasive against my teeth. I try not to chew on it, but I do, like the wax lips I used to buy at the pool hall when I was ten. I spit it into the sink and go back to bed.

four

My husband whimpers as I sneak back under the covers, but he goes on snoring and I'm glad, because it's a rhythm I've learned to fall asleep to, keeping time with the flashing standby light on my laptop, the swishing of the muslin drapes against the heating grate, and the ticking of the wall clock which counts me down until

just as I begin to fall asleep, I hear the clicking of my own teeth—a drumbeat in this symphony of broken sleep.

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