



Creative Writing Across Mediums and Modes: A Pedagogical Model

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ABSTRACT

This is a creative practice (pedagogy) paper outlining the current formulation of my multimodal introduction to creative writing course. In this paper, I describe the course in detail, address the tensions, tradeoffs, and workarounds inherent in abandoning the traditional workshop model, describe instances of student engagement and success to illuminate this process, and endeavor to explain why high amounts of engagement and enthusiasm I get from my students concerning the content of my course is justified. My multimodal course is a generative course where my students are required to produce work in different creative modes on a near weekly basis. After outlining basic formal structures and providing examples, I challenge my students to produce memes, television scripts, comic book storyboards, slam poetry, blogs, and podcasts. They do these along with assignments requiring they write creative nonfiction, short stories, screenplays, and poetry. I try to make the connections between these modes as clear as possible whether they're writing in visual, audio, and literary (or any combination thereof) mediums. I also challenge students to understand these modes and their greater relation to the narrative and lyric forms.

Most conceptions of the Millennial generation covers anyone born from 1981-2000. This means that millennials have grown up with books, poetry, comic books, films, radio, music, television, theater, personal computers, videogame councils, and chat rooms, which then evolved into message boards, blogs, vlogs, social media, and flash mobs. YouTube made slam poetry readily available to anyone interested. In fact, YouTube and websites like it made just about all visual and audio mediums free to anyone interested, which is an epic media revolution. One that is increasingly becoming a normalized, lived experience, for Generation Z. The generation currently entering our classrooms.

It is intensely important to understand as much as we can about the human creative process. For most students, if they think about these things at all, and it never occurs to them to consider different creative mediums discretely, or as individual productive exercises, until they get to college.

There is a significant importance in understanding the value in the connectedness of these mediums because understanding one leads to a better fundamental understanding of the others. This is not to say that there isn't value in intensive study in a single genre like fiction, but there is little reason to believe that the practice of fiction can't be transferred to other modes or mediums of creative production. It just happens that discrete study in specific mediums is the way creative writing is generally taught. A typical creative writing class is generally conducted as follows: analyze style and craft in masterworks, usually short stories, then write a story, print it out, and bring it to workshop. Repeat the process once more toward the end of the semester. The AWP Bookfair is a testament to printed story and poetry mediums. They are wonderful mediums. However, teaching them as discrete artifacts is particularly limiting given the context of a broad range of narrative and lyrically driven creative applications, which is to say there is a whole lot more we could be doing when introducing our students to the craft of writing.

There is a whole host of academic literature, from composition studies, to creative writing studies, to cognitive science, supporting the idea that cross-genre, cross-medium, and cross-modal study of writing and language is not only a legitimate pedagogical model, but perhaps holds greater value and greater potential for students hungry to focus their creative energy toward language and narrative. Zuzana Husarova provides a wonderful review and synthesis of this literature in her article, "A Method of Teaching Multimodal Creative Writing". I highly recommend her article, also her bibliography. My intention with this article is to explain the structure, reasoning, and results I've had in applying multimodal and cross-medium methods of teaching in my undergraduate level introductory creative writing course.

When I say multimodal, I use the definition of modes, and the list of those modalities, as outlined by the New London School: written language, oral language, visual representation, gestural representation, spatial representation, tactile representation, and the representation of the self (Cope and Kalantzis 12). At the level of pedagogy, and at the level of cognition, the claim is that human beings conceptualize and analyze information by classifying (creating schema for) that information and then creating an understanding of that classification in relation to other schema. This would mean, for instance, that a the study of oral language offers students a better understanding of how written language works, which it does, in much the same way a study of foreign language provides students with a better understanding of how their native language operates at several levels (spoken, written, gestural representation etc.). The learning lives of human beings have always been, by definition, multimodal. However, many teachers of creative writing are still using a teaching model that conceptualizes creative mediums as they existed nearly one hundred years ago (Blythe and Sweet 308). Ignoring our current creative media reality not only does a disservice to the students by implicitly denying their lived experience, but it also disregards a genuine opportunity to magnify student knowledge and conceptual organization. The ever-increasing proliferation of mediums over the last thirty years has

forever altered the face of the creative writing landscape. It is the lived experience of our students, and this needs to be acknowledged. As a result, I developed an introduction to creative writing course whereby I teach the fundamental structure of as many creative mediums (new and old) as is possible in one semester, though I'm currently working on adding more.

For my introductory class, students must produce short stories, comic books, screenplays, stage plays, formal and free verse poetry, memes, podcasts, and works of creative non-fiction. My reasoning for this is threefold:

1. Learning across modalities and mediums provides students with a greater understanding of how lyric and narrative function, how the different mediums are both discrete and connected, and what successful lyric and narrative can look like in any given medium while at the same time providing them with an understanding of how audio, visual, written, spoken, and improvisational elements are working within, and in relation to, each medium.

2. It's practical. This is to say students, in addition to learning writing techniques, learn practical and technical skills that will allow them to be competitive in this new creative landscape. Moreover, I should mention I feel obligated to provide students with practical and technical skills, especially as they apply to visual, audio, print, special, and personal modalities, because this increases their chances of creative and financial success after they leave my course.

3. It instantly solves a multitude of problems, both old and new, that have constantly popped up, and are continuing to pop up, in traditional workshops.

NARRATIVE AND LYRIC STYLES ACROSS MODES

The structure of my course is simple. The first third of the semester is spent studying the fundamentals of narrative and lyric styles, both discretely and as they relate to each other. This is because I believe these styles are universal in their applications i.e. narrative and lyric styles can be applied to any modality and in any medium. For these weeks, students are required to write short stories and poems. 1,000 words a week for narrative. Six to ten poems a week (one week formal, one week free verse—slam poems are encouraged but not required). Half the week (the Thursday class) is spent on instruction i.e. students read examples in advance (as contemporary as I can find), and we discuss them in terms of their fundamental construction, the other half of the week (the Tuesday class) is spent on student oral presentation i.e. every student reads the work they produced that week to the rest of the class. This structure is continued throughout the semester. We do not workshop, though weakly mini-critiques are required on the course management system, which is Moodle at my institution.

This is followed by a unit on comic books, in which I provide examples of comic books, comic book scripts, and discuss story board anatomy. We then discuss the fundamentals of their construction. This is an ideal introduction to visual storytelling as students are required to think about visual composition and movement as they exist in a static state. For instance, they have to begin to consider and apply visual perspectives i.e. shot range: extreme close-up, close-up, medium shot, wide shot, long shot, and bird's eye. Students are then required to orally present both their scripts and story boards for this unit. This process is repeated the following unit which focuses on film and television, the main difference being that students are required to read scripts and watch productions of these scripts at the same time in a split screen format. The process is repeated again with stage plays, the difference here being that students must stage their short plays using other students in the class as actors on presentation day. This is followed by the podcast unit, which will be described in a later section. The last unit is creative non-fiction. I save this unit for last because, by this time, the students have created a very solid, very supportive, creative community; and as a result, they are much more comfortable baring their inner lives to the rest of the class. We do not spend time analyzing memes; however, I often assign students to produce and post them on the course management system during weeks when we have light reading and then present them at the beginning of the following class.

Radical revisions of work are assigned throughout the course. The semester culminates with a final project and portfolio. For their final project, each student must write a proposal and outline a few weeks in advance of the semester's end. Past final projects include but are not limited to: a satirical news podcast, short stories, short-short story cycles, an epic poem, poetry chapbooks, an EP of songs (written, recorded, and produced), an illustrated children's book for adults, an experimental play, and a completed comic book (16 pages not including script and story board). It should be noted that more than a few of these projects inspired students to post their creative work on the internet for public consumption (and in some cases, for the hope and/or promise of payment). The final portfolio requires a major revision of a single work or of several poems as well as a three to four page reflection. When it is finally submitted, the average length of a portfolio is 23,000 words (the range is 20,000-28,000). I have been repeatedly told by my students that my course has the reputation for having one of the heaviest workloads at the college. I'm not sure how true that is, but I can say my courses always fill, my evaluations are overwhelmingly positive, and student engagement and response to the course has reached a level of enthusiasm that I could not have imagined when I first developed it.

SOUND EDITING: CREATIVE CHALLENGES AND LEARNING CURVES

For the instructor, there are certain challenges inherent in teaching and modeling podcasts. Instructors must brave what one might imagine is a steep learning curve if they want to learn how to use sound editing software. It is, thankfully, not that difficult to learn the fundamentals of a sound editing program like Audacity or Adobe Audition, and it is therefore not difficult to design a demo and teach said fundamentals. If they do not already have their own software, I tell my students to download Audacity, which is free. It also has all of the capabilities one might need to design and create a podcast. In preparation for the unit, students are assigned several different examples of fiction podcasts. Two central examples include *Welcome to the Night Vale (NV)* and *The Drabblecast (TD)*. Most students are already familiar with *Welcome to the Night Vale* as it is currently the most popular fiction podcast in America. *The Dabblecast* is less known, but it works well as a counterexample because it has a contrasting style. *NV*, the students notice, is voiced by a single narrator, a radio DJ, who describes the strange happenings of Night Vale. There are very little accompanying sound effects, and there is a tonally eerie background score that drops in and out of the narrative. Conversely, *TD* uses a variety of voice actors, and a tonally consistent score that matches the action of the plot, all accompanied by what can only be described as a slew of sound effects. Students are then challenged to consider elements such as narrative frame, narrative style, and tonal style for alternative audio elements. The most important question: what do you hear, and how does each element of what you hear contribute to the overall effect of the listening experience as well as to the overall effect of the story? Then they are assigned to come up with an idea for their own podcast, which they will have two weeks to complete. Given the demands of the assignment, collaboration is encouraged, and nearly all students embrace this collaborative aspect.

I then provide the students with a demo of Audacity, which takes the form of a very short story. I bring in an outline for a story (introduction, conflict, resolution) and then ask my students to provide specifics. I also ask them to choose from examples of music and sound effects. I then use the students as voice actors. At the end of the demo, not only have I shown the class how to use the software, but we also have a roughly completed five-minute podcast that the class has actively participated in creating.

I mentioned the unit takes approximately two weeks. This is because students must write a script, acquire voice actors, record, and edit. I assign page counts and spend a day devoted to recording a scratch track for the sole purposes of trouble shooting. A “scratch track” is a rough recording that will later be replaced by a polished one. Students are required to incorporate music and sound elements, and because these elements are far more effective when played in conjunction with a dialogue element, multiple overlaying tracks are required within the podcast structure. The music cannot be too loud, the dialogue cannot be too soft, and sound effects cannot be overwhelming

(unless, of course, they are meant to be). Dialogue needs to be error free, and students need to learn to either seamlessly edit out errors or rerecord certain pieces of dialogue. Because most students have no previous experience with sound editing, trouble shooting is immensely important.

The podcasts are approximately ten minutes long when they are finished. They are done in a wide variety of styles including poetry podcasts, short stories podcasts, long-form narrative podcasts, satirical news podcasts, radio plays complete with fake commercials, and creative non-fiction podcasts. What becomes clear from listening to these final products is how much students have learned about the value of sound as applies to storytelling and lyrical presentation. Additionally, nearly all of the students will have used friends or classmates as voice actors, some will use a half dozen or more, and this comes with the realization that collaboration means that voice actors never read the lines exactly the way the writer intended, which is a lesson onto itself. Some students have rewritten their scripts multiple times because they've realized there is a difference between the way the words sound inside their heads as opposed to their ears. And, in the end, when reading their personal reflections, it becomes clear that students have learned quite a bit about how important sound is to creating and improving composition.

A POST-DIGITAL AGE ALTERNATIVE MODEL

The advantages of teaching creative writing across modes and mediums are many. Probably the most obvious is one I'd never considered, which is the number of students who don't realize the skills they learned in studying fiction and poetry could be put to use in other mediums besides print. A young student who loves writing, and had been writing since they were very young, notes in their reflection:

I've learned writing is so much more intense than short stories, poetry, and novels. Those ARE NOT the only disciplines writing can fall into... I'd been told the previously mentioned three were the only ways to write. Suddenly, there were all these options on how to construct a world and tell your own story, and I was amazed... I felt like I'd been deprived

I understand that there are many programs that offer courses that provide more intensive study in some of these alternative mediums; however, it's not unfair to say that a good many of them do not; this is especially true for mediums that have appeared more recently. It has been my experience that students coming from creative writing programs end up writing fiction and poetry (usually for print mediums) because that is the tradition from which they were taught. It is not difficult to learn the fundamentals of these alternate mediums; however, if you don't know the fundamentals of their construction, their existence ends up residing on the opposite side of a mysterious and frightening barrier that many students would love to cross but do not know how. A cross-medium, multimodal approach solves this problem.

That there is value in cross-medium learning is also evident to the students. A student writes about the creation of their final project, a children's book for adults:

As someone who had never even picked up a comic book before (except the mini ones that used to come in Wendy's kids' meals), I was skeptical and not super intrigued by the idea of mapping out and writing my own. However, this portion of the class ended up playing a pretty significant role in my final project. As I was drawing out the scenes, I found myself thinking about colors and point of view and different angles. I don't think I had ever considered aspects like those before. Even the podcasts helped with this project as I thought about what sound effects would be funny, and I found ways to include bits of those in a project that didn't even involve sound. You don't realize all the things you've learned until you start putting them to use!

This is an example of a student taking disparate elements from different mediums (written, visual, and audio) and conceptualizing them in a way that allows the student to create a greater effect. This is because the skills learned in each medium are transferable i.e. the student finds themselves conceptualizing audio elements for a composition where audio is supposedly absent. I find this also helps students to understand visualization and setting across the mediums. This is because they realize how much easier it is to communicate visual information in a visual medium, or audio information in an audio medium. This helps to solve another common problem found in workshops, which is that students, when writing, often have difficulty understanding how to address audio and visual issues in print compositions.

This is how a student can end up deciding that their most valuable narrative tool is their "drawing skills". I have a student who, whether or not they are working in a visual medium, has learned that they can understand their own scenes better, can conceptualize them better, and can describe them better, if they draw them first.

Another student writes,

I was surprised at myself at what points of the semester I enjoyed and what I didn't. I thought I was going to love writing for a comic. I did not... ..However, writing a podcast was so interactive and so unique that I found (despite the struggles of working with so many voice actors) that I enjoyed the way words had to mean so much. Suddenly they weren't just on a page, they were being spoken aloud and each sentence needed to be constructed in a way that would capture the audience. It wasn't the same as a play, though I did enjoy script writing that as well.

Putting aside the fact that this student actually did write and draw a pretty cool comic book scene, what they are describing is a learned experience concerning how different mediums operate in relation to one another. The student realizes their audience cannot see the actors in a purely audio

medium; thus, it is in some ways different from a play. For an audio based medium, what matters is what you can hear, which is why, “the words had to mean so much.” Very often, when creating podcasts, students come to broad ranging multimodal realizations, and make even more connections, as they realize they need to ad-lib over dialogue they’ve discovered comes across as stiff and inauthentic. As a professor who doesn’t particularly appreciate stiff and inauthentic dialogue, it brings me joy when students identify and fix this sort of thing on their own, unprompted. Additionally, it’s knowledge they can then bring to other mediums.

On the strict level of narrative, all my students know how to write a unified scene by the end of the semester. This is a consequence of the structure of the course, which generally requires them to write one scene a week. It’s a simple thing, but it’s hardly a secret that many beginning writing students, and even a few advanced ones, have difficulty with conceiving and executing single scenes. I cannot count how many times I’ve been in a workshop where students submit work with little to no understanding as to the function of a scene, and as a result, they have little understanding of how they might string scenes together in order to create a larger narrative. In order for there to be enough time for all of the students to present their work in the first half of the week (Tuesday in a T/TH course) they can only bring in 1000 words of material. They write from prompts, which are mostly vague but that require some sort of conflict development that then can either be resolved, heightened, or put off until later. Students are not required to continue their narratives, but many of them do. I have had multiple students who wrote complete stories over the course of the semester, stringing scenes together across the mediums. Each new scene a continuation of the previous week, and some going so far as to include poems about their characters or the worlds they’ve built (creative non-fiction excluded); all leading into their final project. More often than not though, students will stay with some of their characters for a few scenes and then decide to move on. Again, this is incredibly valuable in a multimedia/multimodal environment. The students learn the requirements, tradeoffs, strengths, and weakness involved in the different mediums and modalities during each unit of the process. And, I should mention that (in my opinion) improvement in the quality of student work over the course of the semester is just as evident as when I was running traditional workshops. If anything, it is better.

I believe a large reason for this is because everyone must read (or present, in the case of comics, podcasts, and the staging of plays) the work they’ve written for that week, every week. Workshops can be, often are, barbed. Students bring their work two, maybe three, times over a semester, and they are often operating at a level of anxiety that they’ve never known before. It’s your day. You’re in the spotlight, and heaven help you if the creative chances you took don’t resonate with the rest of the class. This problem goes away when everyone reads every week. Individuals are removed from the center of class attention. Hands usually stop shaking after the first presentation day, even mine. I should probably mention I do all of the assignments as my students do them, except for the final

project. I present my work as well, usually last. A large portion of my students have commented that this makes them feel less apprehensive because my participation makes me part of the community. In this formulation, as opposed to the traditional workshop, I've noticed that students feed off each other's creative energy and also allow themselves to be inspired by each other. There is also an accountability, and a sense of competitiveness, in knowing that everyone is going to hear what you've written for that week. This also builds camaraderie. One student writes,

I was guilty of thinking 'Oh, I can do this in a few hours' I learned that if I wanted to be proud of myself when our Tuesday classes were finished, I had to truly push my work ethic and imagination to its fullest extent. I myself am an auditory learner, listening to the accents and change of voice level from my fellow students helped me with my own writing. This is an aspect of this course that I think trumps any other English course I am aware of or have taken. Listening to my classmates read their work, you almost gain a better understanding of that person as a whole. Even if you had never spoken a word to that person, once 2:05 hit, you felt like you knew them a little better every week. There was a true bond in this class that I had never been a part of prior.

The goal of this article is not to act as an indictment of the traditional workshop. However, there is a problem with students presenting their work for critique to a group of people who may or may not be the writer's intended audience. That workshops can be problematic in this way is a topic that has been covered by a host of academics (Amato and Fleisher, Bishop, Cain, Cooley, Fenza, Hooks, McGurl, Ritter) However, as previously mentioned, the motivation behind the creation of this course is in large part practical in nature.

There is an ever rising preponderance of creative mediums. The number has increased immensely during our lifetime. When the traditional creative writing workshop was developed, there was film, stage, radio, and print. Radio and film were still generally working, at the structural level, in the tradition dramatic form. So, when the traditional creative writing workshop was developed, it made sense to teach fiction, poetry, and drama because that was essentially all there was to teach. Nearly a century has passed since the progenitors of the workshop put a bunch of people in a room so they could talk to each other about their writing. There have been many attempts to alter this model over the last century, but most professors who are currently abandoning the workshop model are doing so because the increased class sizes at many institutions prohibits it (Blyth and Sweet 317). However, there are alternative methods.

Novels, short stories, poems, and plays were the driving cultural forces in the time the workshop was developed. It was a time when short story writers could make a living off their short stories and poetry still paid. It was a time when most people did not own televisions. If people weren't reading, they were playing cards or listening to the radio. That is not the case today. Though, for some strange reason, it seems that writers still seem to be producing the content that dominates the cultural

landscape. Podcasts, Comics, Films, Television, YouTube, and social media, unless they are improvisational in nature, are all driven by writers. Nearly all of them are narratively driven, though their lyrical elements cannot be denied. Nearly all of the popular ones, are provocative in a way that caters to a specific audience, and this is the lived experience of today's new creative writing students.

Having taught several introductory level creative writing workshops, both inside and outside of the academy, the most striking thing I've found is the sheer variety in my students' interests. As an educator, I feel I have a responsibility to cater to these interests. Students enroll in my courses with majors in Game Design, Marketing, Communications, Early English Education, Music, Fine Art, Biology, Psychology, Pre-Law, and Architecture among others. The majority of them do not come into class expecting to become poets and novelists. I'm not sure we should treat them like they do. I do not see these differing expectations as a problem; instead, I find it immensely productive to challenge my students to produce the sort of work they are interested in producing. I want them to learn, and I also want them to leave my class feeling like they've learned something they can put to use.

In my classes, I try to foster a creative community that is both supportive and collaborative, and I make sure that I point this out to students as often as I can. Writing is almost always a collaborative process. It requires editors, designers, producers, co-writers, and most importantly, it requires an audience. By fostering a community with a collective goal, I'm not only trying to demystify the idea that writing is an individual act of genius, but also actively discourage the sort of toxic competitiveness that so often presents itself in creative writing workshops. This community of encouragement counteracts the very common idea that good works are produced in solitude by a small class of creative geniuses.

The idea is to show students that creative writing not only has immense social value outside of academia, but also that it is ubiquitous in its utility. That it's value runs across all mediums and modes. The fundamentals of narrative and lyric can be taught, and they are universal in their application. The key to good writing is embracing the work, and understanding the aesthetic standards that exists for that particular medium, genre, or mode. All of these things can be taught to students. Once they understand the fundamentals of different genres, mediums, and styles, they are then able to experiment and improve in the sorts of writing that resonate with them individually and enter the sorts of artistic communities that they admire most. This is the very definition of success when it comes to writing, and it is our task as teachers of creative writing to give them the tools for success.

BIOGRAPHY:

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