

Creating Connection: Composition Theory and Creative Writing Craft in the First-Year Writing Classroom

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Abstract

In the first-year writing classroom, students are rarely introduced to the composition theories that inform course pedagogy and writing situations. Although the Writing About Writing movement seeks to bridge this gap for students, the first-year writing course stands to lose its foundation in Writing Across the Curriculum models. Institution administrators and faculty across the disciplines are not always convinced that these courses provide students with the savvy to move overarching ideas about writing from one course to another. This paper introduces the notion of using the model of creative writing craft as an alternative for discussions about composition theory with first-year writing students. Since creative writers discuss craft in a way that is easily accessible to students, this model will help students achieve a deeper understanding of theory while preparing them to write in the disciplines.

Keywords

composition theory, craft criticism, Writing About Writing, first-year writing, creative writing craft, Writing Across the Curriculum

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Introduction

The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement, which began as early as the 1960s, continues to gain ground and thrive in academic institutions all over the world. Both faculty and administrators have continued to adopt the WAC premise that incorporating writing into courses across the disciplines will not only help students to understand course material more fully but will also help students to differentiate between multiple genres of writing whose conventions are often unique to a particular discipline. While WAC programs can vary greatly between institutions, first-year writing has come to be seen as the foundation for these programs. Whereas composition as a discipline (which stemmed from rhetoric) has been a field of study in some capacity for thousands of years, the WAC movement has again redefined the purpose of composition courses within the institution by teaching students to negotiate the rhetorical situation of any college level course (Townsend, 2002). As such, faculty from across the disciplines are becoming more aware of and concerned

about how writing is taught in the first-year classroom, making conversations about teaching writing and composition theory a central part of general education.

As teachers of writing, the two of us continually discuss composition theory through our conferences, texts, and program development. Students are exposed to these theories indirectly through the assignments given to them, the discussions about rhetorical purpose, or the classroom emphasis on process. They are then expected to transfer this knowledge to other writing opportunities throughout their academic careers and beyond. We argue that first-year writing students should be exposed to composition theory through classroom discussion. This discussion should allow students to understand writing better and engage in the conversation about composition theory as they continue their own experiences as novice writers. Because creative writers discuss and write about craft in ways that are very accessible to students, we see instruction about composition theory mirroring creative writing craft conversations in the first-year writing classroom. Giving students access to ideas about craft criticism, which we see as a metacommentary about writing, will enable them to better understand composition theory, engage in conversations about writing that few undergraduate students have had access to before, and become more informed in their application of these theories across the disciplines.

The Writing About Writing Approach

We should recognize here the Writing About Writing (WAW) movement, which supports the notion that students will be able to better transfer their experiences/knowledge in the writing classroom to other writing circumstances when introduced to writing scholarship in order to better learn the discourse of the field. In the introduction to *Writing About Writing: A College Reader*, Wardle and Downs (2011) assert that "...the best way to do this...[is] to...introduce[e] stu-

dents directly to what writing researchers have learned about writing and challeng[e] them to respond by writing and doing research of their own" (p. v). While we see value in this approach, it is not our purpose to say that writing theory, scholarship, and reflection on students' literacy need to serve as a main conversation or basis for a first-year writing course. Rather, discussions about these theories in the midst of other course content and writing opportunities will further aid students in applying writing theory. We agree with the WAW approach in that an understanding of composition theory gives students a context for their work; however, we also maintain the original purpose of first-year writing as a vehicle for both writing theory and WAC. Our approach recognizes that first-year writing courses became foundational in higher education in the first place because students need instruction about how to become academic writers beyond simply learning rhetorical strategies.

Breaking Down Discourse Boundaries

As students enter colleges and universities, they are asked to make connections and cross boundaries that aren't always clear. While students' academic growth, to some extent, is enriched by their ability to make these connections, faculty should help students navigate through foundational theories so that students may build upon them. As the WAW approach asserts, we contend that keeping composition theory discussions from first-year students is yet another boundary that needs to be broken in writing classrooms.

Scholars have created this boundary because most view the introduction of composition theory into the first-year writing classroom as an absurd notion. Not only is theory written on a level that college freshmen may not easily understand, but reading writing about writing may only confuse young writers. Many theorists recognize that the lack of a common language in the classroom makes it difficult for a college-level instructor

to decenter authority. But instructor authority needs to be decentered to a certain extent in order to demystify pedagogy and critical analysis of writing theory and practice for students. Allowing students to “see behind the curtain” of pedagogical practices in the classroom enables them to stake their own claims in moving from novice to more independent academic writers. In the oft-quoted 1985 essay “Inventing the University,” composition theorist and academic David Bartholomae (1985) alleges that “education has failed to involve students in scholarly projects, projects that allow students to act as though they were colleagues in an academic enterprise” because of the student’s lack of entry into the academic discourse community (p. 143). According to Bartholomae, most students are unable to engage in academic endeavors because too many students simply cannot understand the discourse enough to participate in an existing academic community. Bartholomae’s theory of inclusion through discourse is extremely useful in that it gives insight into the difficult problem of writing students’ exclusion from the academic discourse of composition theory. Faculty may focus on time-tested practices based on theory, but they do not expose the theories that govern these classroom applications to their pupils. Even Bartholomae (1985) recognizes that a disconnect exists between his theory and actual classroom practice; however, practical solutions for “basic writers” (or unsophisticated writers) are only referenced in his essay. He does not give practical implementation advice based on these references.

Bartholomae describes the problem of discourse as it applies to “basic writers,” but this discourse discordance is also a problem with regard to the social structure of classrooms. Throughout his essay, Bartholomae recognizes that teachers of writing rarely provide academic assignments that allow students to engage in the writing process as equals to their instructors. Of course, he realizes that even when instructors do offer students these “scholarly projects,” few stu-

dents, if any, are elevated to the level of colleague. He asserts that

The student, in effect, has to assume privilege without having any. And since students assume privilege by locating themselves within the discourse of a particular community—within a set of specifically acceptable gestures and common-places—learning, at least as it is defined in the liberal arts curriculum, becomes more a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of invention and discovery. (Bartholomae, 2003, p.143)

As a result, Bartholomae’s conclusion to this troubling problem of power in the classroom is that, as instructors, we must treat “our students as students,” until the students learn the appropriate discourse (p. 162). Unfortunately, his outlook reinforces the hierarchical structure in the composition classroom that he identifies as producing “mimicry” and not original academic discourse. Overall, Bartholomae sees himself as unable to give up his authority as a teacher and a scholar because he is already a part of the academy’s discourse community. Peter Elbow (1983) offers the most notable scholarly opposition, terming his own philosophy, conversely, “student empowerment,” though Mina Shaughnessy (2003), Paulo Freire (1970), and Gerald Graff (1992) all react against a classroom where the teacher holds all of the authority.

Accessing Composition Theory for Students

Two more recent books, *Being a Writer: A Community of Writers Revisited* (2003) and *What is “College-Level” Writing?* (2006), aspire to bring composition theory to undergraduates, but with only limited success. In their text, *Being a Writer: A Community of Writers Revisited*, Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff (2003) have recognized the need for students to gain exposure to composition theory that “[doesn’t] hide [their] interest in theory,” but instead “reflects much recent scholarship in composition . . . push[ing] students to become

thoughtful about their writing process through regular entries in a writing process diary” (p. xxii). This book even includes small sections entitled “Ruminations and Theory” (Elbow & Belanoff, p. 141). However, these theory sections do not introduce students to explicit theory or even a remediated form of theory. Rather, they introduce students to practices inspired by theory that encourage students to reflect on their own writing practice.

An example of this theory-informed practice can be found in a “Ruminations and Theory” section on “The Dangerous Method” of writing. In this section, Elbow and Belanoff (2003) warn students that creating an outline of a whole paper before writing the paper is “dangerous” (p. 106). Elbow and Belanoff term the practice of deciding what a paper will be about before beginning to write the paper “the Dangerous Method,” because “it leads to various writing difficulties that most of us are familiar with,” such as “procrastinating” and “agonizing over every sentence” (pp. 106-107). The authors point out this notion in order to reinforce their own ideas about exploratory writing (Elbow & Belanoff, 2003, p. 107).

While it is evident that students need to learn new writing processes and practices so that they may see themselves as writers, we are concerned that a section that discusses exploratory writing practices using author-created terms, like “The Dangerous Method,” is titled “Ruminations and Theory.” Our fear is that composition students believe that they have been exposed to composition theory by using this text, but when asked to describe some of the theories the students use the terminology coined by Elbow and Belanoff (2003). *Being a Writer: A Community of Writers Revisited* continues to keep students out of the academic discourse community of composition theory by exposing students to practice instead of theory and using personally created terminology.

While a text/discussion introducing students to composition theory may need to remediate some of the language, the reality is that complex ideas require complex language, so students should be exposed to the original terminology as well as the language that helps them understand the concepts. Additionally, Elbow and Belanoff’s (2003) text confuses actual written theories with the pedagogical practice promoted by theory, furthering student confusion and keeping students out of the composition theory discourse community. Although *Being a Writer* aids in a student’s engagement with composition theory by recognizing that the first-year classroom should include theorists’ ideas, the book fails to actually include any theory and instead promotes student reflection. This is a lost opportunity: students need to be included in the scholarly discourse about composition theory in order to gain a better understanding of the context for first-year writing classrooms and to gain motivation as individual writers.

We can begin to see the benefit of this type of theoretical instruction in Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg’s (2006) collection of essays entitled *What is ‘College-Level’ Writing?* Their collection includes some student essays that reflect on a student writer’s experience with writing before and during his or her college career. The book itself is published by NCTE and includes essays from theorists, professors, administrators, high school teachers, and first-year college writing students all attempting to answer Sullivan’s question, “What is ‘College-Level’ Writing?” (p. 1). Sullivan answers this question himself in his essay “An Essential Question: What is ‘College-Level’ Writing?” by stating that

[A] student should write in response to an article, essay or reading selection that contains at least some abstract content [, which] should demonstrate [...a] willingness to evaluate ideas and issues carefully[, s]ome skill at analysis and higher-level thinking[, t]he ability to shape and

organize material effectively[, t]he ability to integrate some of the material from the reading skillfully[, and t]he ability to follow the standard rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. (Sullivan, pp. 16-17)

Sullivan's answer concentrates on the skills that a student must master in order for his or her writing to be considered college level. Many of the responses in the book, however, such as Kathleen McCormick's (2006) "Do You Believe in Magic?," focus on the theory that connects to the teaching practices described.

McCormick (2006), a Professor of Literature and Pedagogy at Purchase College at State University of New York, relies on "concept[s] of epistemic rhetoric put forth by James Berlin and ... analyzed in depth by George Hillocks, and the notion of flow, first developed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and put into ...practice by Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm," to discuss how collaborative research helps students research and write individually (p. 200). McCormick focuses on the theoretical basis for her assignment before discussing the assignment, classroom practices, and student skill set later in her essay.

Similarly, Kimberly L. Nelson (2006), a first-year student at the University of Iowa, in her essay "The Great Conversations (of the Dining Hall)," includes the little bit of composition theory that she knows as a student writer to help support her conversational concept of learning. Nelson "come[s] to understand" that she was "making [her] first utterances in the 'conversation of mankind'" and relates the experience of discussing her paper with her mother to Kenneth A. Bruffee's quote, "Reflective thinking is something we learn to do, and we learn to do it from and with other people. We learn to think reflectively as a result of learning to talk" (p. 286).

Obviously, McCormick's exposure to theory is much different than Nelson's because McCormick is an established scholar and Nelson is a first-year student.

Nelson uses what little knowledge she has of theory to reflect on her writing process because classroom practice and textbooks like *Being a Writer* (2003) teach students that theory is related to reflection. If a student writer like Nelson was exposed to more composition theory, then she could begin to think more deeply about how theory is connected to her own ideas and processes. Direct exposure to composition theory, as opposed to classroom or pedagogical practices, can help give students context for their own writing in the writing classroom and throughout their college career.

In making these assumptions, we still understand that in students' minds, composition is a required general education course; they usually do not think of themselves as writers. And they are not often pointed to texts that lead them to believe they are. Elbow and Belanoff (2003) address students as writers throughout their text, titling the first chapter "Discovering Yourself as a Writer" (p. 3). However, the focus of the text is on the practices inspired by the theories that Elbow and Belanoff subscribe to, not necessarily the theories students may come to adopt for themselves. Sullivan and Tingberg's (2006) text invites students into the discussion surrounding the question, "What is College-Level Writing?" but only includes one student essay that attempts to address composition theory as support for her argument in any way. Although Sullivan and Tingberg's text seeks to include student writers, how would a first-year writing student know about this text or gain access to it?"

We both encountered *What is "College-Level Writing?"* during our graduate studies, and we have shared some of this text with our students, but we do not believe that these essays were intended for a first-year writing student classroom. Sullivan and Tingberg's (2006) text is not a student textbook and does not present theory directly for its readers. Composition theory is mentioned throughout different essays in the book, but only in a way that helps contextualize individual

authors' answers to the overarching question. Thus, both *Being a Writer: A Community of Writers Revisited* and *What is "College-Level" Writing?* show an eagerness for composition theorists and teachers to share their knowledge about composition theory, but neither clearly expresses theoretical concepts so that beginning scholars may join the conversation. As recognized by WAW pedagogy, introducing composition theory in the first-year writing classroom is a new way to give students context for their work as writers and to encourage them to consider themselves writers (or people who write). But we must be mindful of the responsibilities of the first-year writing course to the academy. While WAW situates composition theory and scholarship as the central focus in the classroom, we worry that this move may compromise the foundational goals of first-year writing. To negotiate the connection between first-year writing and composition theory, we see creative writing craft as a model to give students context.

Creative Writing Craft and Composition Theory

First-year students tend to think of most writers as creative writers. These institutionally constructed boundaries between creative writing and composition theory continue to be broken down in writing classrooms, but composition students are typically not exposed to authors' discussions about craft. Tim Mayers (2005), in his book *(Re)Writing Craft*, argues that "craft criticism . . . can and should serve as a bridge between creative writing and composition studies" in order to "forge an academic disciplinary area in which writing is of primary concern" (p. xiv). Mayers' argument hinges on the idea that creative writers and composition theorists need to share a department in most major universities because of their shared concerns. He recognizes that "because first-year composition courses are usually required of all students, whereas creative writing courses are not . . . students in creative writing courses . . . want to be in those courses," and, therefore, that "cre-

ative writing students . . . are far more likely to think of themselves as writers and to enjoy writing" (pp. 114-115). As illustrated by Elbow and Belanoff's (2003) text, composition instructors want their students to consider themselves writers and take their writing seriously. However, as Mayers points out, required course classroom environments differ from the atmosphere in a class the student elected to take. We agree with Mayers' classroom distinction, and we also make it a goal in our classrooms to promote the idea that students should see themselves as writers. We see the marriage of composition theory and creative writing craft in the first-year writing classroom as a way to help our students see themselves as writers.

In the first-year writing classroom it is important that students see themselves as writers in order to stay engaged and motivated while developing and discovering their own complex writing processes. However, similar to an issue found in *Writing About Writing* classrooms, many composition instructors may be concerned that engagement with creative writing craft or composition theory will either put students into a writing-centered vacuum or into a creative writing course that does not focus on other academic writing. Through *Writing Across the Curriculum* theory, however, we understand more fully the effects that a strong foundation in writing theory/practice has on students' performance across the disciplines. The WAC approach, which promotes both writing to learn and writing in the disciplines, gives students the opportunity to use writing as a tool to better learn course material and to learn a particular discipline's specific conventions and genres. Mayers (2005) also presents a dichotomy of concern for writing instructors, stating that he "understand(s) that writing is an act of discovery . . . but [does not] want to do [his] students a disservice by proceeding from a notion of writing their future professors will not share" (p. 135). Like Mayers, we recognize that writing is about exploration but also

that first-year writing courses are required by almost all major post-secondary institutions because students need to learn the skill set that will aid their future academic and career writing endeavors.

This recognition leads us back to the conundrum that is composition. For decades, those of us who research and teach composition have situated our thinking around the fact that writing is both a discipline and a skill. Unlike so many other disciplines, writing is at once transparently connected to almost every class on campus. Institutional pressures often inform what we teach in the first-year writing classroom, so we often leave out theory to make way for a skill set, arming students with a “bag of tricks,” or set of general writing practices, to get through writing across the disciplines. Considering creative writing craft may be the link so that more explicit theory can inform student writers.

We do not want the first-year writing classroom to turn into a creative writing course or a remedial course about composition theory. Mayers (2005) suggests that “even in a composition course that focuses exclusively on the academic, analytical, and interpretive essay” students should be asked questions like, “How did you plan for these pieces before you wrote them?” and “Did you discover anything new while you wrote?” in order for the student to “understand writing processes” and “to find poetic elements even in the most rigidly structured types of writing” (p. 135). Again, Mayers, like Elbow and Belanoff (2003), sees the interaction between creative writing craft and composition theory as being reflective, with the added goal of recognizing the creative element in any academic writing situation. Mayers also suggests assigning some creative writing in composition courses, but mentions that he “rarely teach(es) the university’s required first-year composition course” and admits some of the difficulties he has encountered engaging his third-year composition students in the creative writing process (p. 137-138). We are not necessarily promoting creative

writing in the first-year writing classroom; however, we hope to expose students to craft criticism in order to contextualize composition theory.

We agree with Mayer (2005) that “craft criticism” and composition theory are closely related, and we believe in his idea that there should be “a productive alliance between the two fields”; in addition, we would argue that this connection makes composition theory accessible to first year students (p. xiv). If college composition students understand how closely their writing practices are connected to those of the creative writers they look up to, then the students will be better able to take their own writing seriously and become more motivated. Mayers defines “craft criticism” as “critical prose written by self- or institutionally identified ‘creative writers’” in which “textual production takes precedence over any concern with textual interpretation” (p. 34). He identifies that “craft criticism” includes a pedagogical element and an evaluative element, much like the reflective writing that he and Elbow and Belanoff (2003) advise students to do. By having first-year writing students read “craft criticism,” we see an instructor giving students a model for reflective writing and a context to help them understand clearly stated composition theories. For example, an instructor might use portions of Stephen King’s (2000) *On Writing* to show students that professional creative writers engage in the same type of reflective writing as they do. By giving students examples of “craft criticism” and then having them write reflectively on their own writing, instructors are affirming the students as writers and showing students that they are part of the writing discourse community.

Exposure to “craft criticism” and reflective writing serves as a bridge to composition theory. After discussing a particular creative writer’s process by using a “craft criticism” example, we suggest that writing faculty introduce students to a composition theory that can be applied to the “craft criticism” example in simple

terms and show the students how those terms relate to the more complex discourse of the original theorists. Faculty can do this easily by showing the theory that supports particular classroom practices, such as peer response. In this example, by giving students an introduction to the social constructionist view of composition—or the view that writing is a social act—and the theorists who subscribe to this view, students will gain a better understanding about why they are asked to participate in peer response and why it is seen as a useful tool in the writing process. By incorporating theory, students learn the language and can engage with the composition theory discourse community.

The Skewed View of Composition Theory

By giving students the theory and an example of how that theory might be applied, it may be argued, the instructor is only giving the students a skewed view based on the scholar's own prescribed theories and biases. Mayers (2005) points out that “the ‘theory wars’ in English studies have been largely about how theory might (or might not) be ‘understood’ or interpreted or how it might be used as an instrument for interpretation” among scholars, and we suspect that this potential bias will be a greater concern with first-year students (p. 130). Gerald Graff (1992) addresses the idea that “students are expected to join an intellectual community that they see only in disconnected glimpses” when they are only exposed to one scholarly perspective about any topic (p. 12). In his book *Beyond the Culture Wars*, Graff presents the problem of students being thought about, but not included in their own education or the work of the academy through cultural conflict models. He introduces practical pedagogical techniques to help students understand one interpretation of a piece of writing by presenting an opposing or different view of that same piece of writing. We hope that scholars will build on Graff's pedagogical practices by bringing other scholars into the classroom to discuss their guid-

ing theoretical principles, once students have built up the necessary discourse in order to become part of this scholarly conversation.

We see Graff's (1992) pedagogical approach as the practical application of John Trimbur's (2003) “rhetoric of dissensus” to the first-year writing classroom (p. 470). Trimbur introduces a “rhetoric of dissensus” as a term offered to readers in his essay “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning.” The term is defined as a recognition of the existence of differences and that different positions/perspectives can only be understood in relation to each other. In our view, creating a “rhetoric of dissensus” will cause conflict within the classroom between scholars or academic perspectives that will reveal to students that there are other theoretical vantage points and that the teacher is not an unwavering authority. We see the inclusion of other scholarly opinions on theory in the first-year writing classroom as a way to decenter classroom authority and include students in a scholarly discourse community that helps them feel more like writers.

Students as Writers

It is important for students to feel like writers, at least to some extent. For students to be successful in academia and in the workforce, a dedication and attention to writing well must be achieved. When students are only asked to think of writing as a skill, they struggle to become engaged with their processes. Teachers of general education writing courses will be able to better motivate their students by bringing creative writing craft together with composition theory in the first-year writing classroom. Additionally, students will have a way to understand composition theory and further engage in the ongoing conversation of writing. Creating connections between creative writing and composition theory is an innovative way for instructors to make the composition classroom a place to talk about writing so that students recognize themselves as writers.

If composition instructors consider this approach and other strategies to include students in theoretical conversations about writing, they will be able to better prepare these students to write in other areas of academia. By engaging students in the discourse about writing, whether through creative writing craft or WAW approaches, students are better able to articulate their own need for further instruction and/or clarification in other courses. Faculty across the disciplines will benefit from the transferable knowledge students gain and can continue cultivating students as learners and writers in any discipline. Making writing a more accessible and palpable experience for students will only further the mission of WAC and give instructors from all disciplines a stronger foundation from which to work. ■■

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