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### Creative Play Pedagogy

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CREATIVE PLAY PEDAGOGY

by

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# CREATIVE PLAY PEDAGOGY

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University of Nebraska, 2023

Advisor: Shari Stenberg

This thesis serves as a primer text for creative play pedagogy, a new approach to teaching arts subjects. In accordance with the author's teaching experience, this text is primarily concerned with the application of new pedagogical shifts to center creative play in the community college creative writing classroom.

Part One lays out a definition and rationale for creative play as a concept for teachers. The research outlined in this section illustrates how engagement with the arts benefits students' mental-emotional and social well-being. Following this research, the author investigates barriers to creative play that exist in traditional pedagogies as well as institutional structures. This section also includes some theory on emotion in the classroom.

Part Two focuses on revising some of the traditional pedagogies of the creative writing classroom, both to update them for the community college context and to make space for creative play. The section includes common catchphrases that are used in the creative writing classroom, explores the harms and limitations of these catchphrases, and offers revised methods for addressing key lessons. Also in this section, the author

ponders grading and feedback practices, and explores the effects of reactive vs. proactive teaching as it pertains to creative writing.

Part Three outlines examples from the author's own classroom. This section begins with the broad concerns of course design and learning objectives. Then, it moves toward student self-determination and, using quotations from the author's students, offers rationale for why students choose creative writing at the community college. Overwhelmingly, students are looking for a fun class in which they can be part of a writing community. Lastly, the text in this section suggests some classroom activities that may foster fun and community.

## 1: Creative Play Pedagogy Theory & Rationale

### **Elitist Pedagogy vs. Creative Play**

When I was a senior in high school, my art teacher gave our class an assignment to create a collage of black-and-white Xeroxed images from books and magazines in the school library. The black-and-white collage was the first step, and then we would colorize using a technique she would teach us later. I decided to use illustrations from a botany textbook, which showed anatomical diagrams of flowers, alongside snippets of text from a dictionary entry for the word “life.” I loved the collage I made!

Shortly after we finished our collages, she decided to cut the part where we colorized them, effectively turning our drafts into our final products. Apparently, we were running short on time in the class, and she wanted to get to other things. A few months later, I was helping hang up the senior show in a small local gallery. She had a stack of everyone’s collages – except mine. She apologized profusely, telling me she must have lost it in transit. Later, when we were dismantling the gallery show, she gave my piece back to me. It had never been lost. She didn’t include it with everyone else’s because she, quote, “didn’t think it was art.”

At that moment, I tried not to cry. I felt angry, hurt, and stupid. I never forgave her; I held a grudge for the rest of the semester. Far worse, I lost all trust in my own creativity; I decided that art was not for me. I didn’t make another piece of visual art until I was 29 years old, stuck in my apartment during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This process, of playing creatively, being shamed, and then abandoning any interest in a creative pursuit, is not unique to me. In fact, it is depressingly common among creative writers who experience the college-level workshop. I hear it all the time from friends, and even from my peers in the university English department: creative writing classes made them stop seeing themselves as creative writers. An online search will turn up written accounts by poets and fiction writers who left their BA, BFA, or MFA programs in fits of despair and had trouble returning to their craft (O’Connell). These accounts likely only scratch the surface of the real number. A pall of shame surrounds the low output of writing, which leads to lies about the amount of writing former students are actually doing (O’Connell). This may be because the onus for writer’s block is placed on the writers themselves – they’re told to ‘turn off their inner critics’ – as though the flaw belongs to them, rather than to the system.

For most public and private K-12 students in the US, classes on creative subjects start in elementary school. In these young grades, art class is all about play. Students are taught the color wheel, and encouraged to play with paint mixing. They wear paint-splattered smocks and get their hands dirty. In language arts classes, they make silly rhymes and write funny stories about puppies and bunnies. They color and dance and honk on recorders and pound on colorful xylophones.

At some point, though, arts teachers turn toward ‘quality.’ Artistic pursuits must be geared toward improvement or skill-honing; art for art’s sake is no longer the point. In many secondary and post-secondary arts classrooms, play is downright discouraged. Play, though, is critical for humans’ mental well-being.

In 2019, the famous street artist known as Banksy launched a website, GrossDomesticProduct, selling one-of-a-kind branded materials and memorabilia for as

little as thirteen euros an item. Each buyer was limited to one item, and wealthy art collectors were explicitly discouraged from attempting to buy from the shop. I say “attempting,” because there was a catch. To be selected as a buyer, patrons had to submit applications with their answer to the question, “~~Why~~ does art matter?”

The strikethrough on that “Why” makes for a rhetorically interesting question. In America, we generally agree that art (and art education) matters. In 2016, Americans for the Arts conducted a nationwide survey to assess public opinion on art education. An overwhelming majority of respondents, 88%, agreed that “arts are part of a well-rounded K-12 education.” 56% of respondents “strongly” agreed (Cohen). Among teachers of the arts (including visual art, creative writing, music, drama, dance, creative coding, and any other creative subjects), the answer to the leftover question “Does art matter?” likely has a full consensus: yes, if anything at all matters, art matters a great deal. In recovering the “why,” though, this consensus fades, and therein lay the divergent pedagogies and philosophies of arts education.

In the context of education, both in arts classrooms and other subjects, the merit of art can be defined, and is defined, in more than one way. Does a best definition of artistic merit exist? I argue that the foremost merit of art is creative play, because play supports mental-emotional wellbeing and fosters community.

### **Why Art Matters (Empirically)**

Learning to appreciate art, and taking time to do so, matters because these practices boost our capacity for connection and compassion, as well as encourage creative play, which is an essential human need. Though the value of art goes well beyond what's empirically observable, art's mental-emotional impacts are nonetheless

widely studied. The fields of psychology, sociology, and education provide ample data on the importance of art, play, and creativity in the wellbeing of people of all ages.

Within psychology and psychotherapy, there is a long history of the use of creative play for its therapeutic effects. Art, music, and dance are used as trauma treatments in cultures around the world (Van der Kolk 240-45). In Western psychology, art therapy is an entire field; it has its own academic journals, including the self-titular *Art Therapy*, whose publication history goes back to 1983. Art therapy goes beyond visual art, as there are therapists who specialize in many other creative media, such as theater, dance, and even creative writing.

Writing to oneself is highly effective in the healing of trauma. Specifically, writing freely without the intent to share is one of the most effective ways to access one's "inner world of feeling" (Van der Kolk 240). This is important, because victims of trauma and individuals who experienced childhood adversity are likely to develop some level of dissociation from their bodies, minds, and selves. Creative writing classes are more well-suited than composition classes to equip students with the focus and confidence it takes to regularly do this kind of writing. Unlike the compositionist, the creative writer often practices writing without structure, sources, or audience in mind. The practice, essentially, is journaling. Journals can be kept in any language, including the wordless language of visual art, and still offer the same benefits.

In addition to benefiting those suffering with PTSD, getting in touch with the self via artistic expression is a proven tool to help reduce anxiety. Anxiety disorders, which affect more than 40 million American adults every year, as well as an estimated 31.9% of adolescents, are the most common mental health complaint in the United States ("Any"). Several studies support art's potential to mitigate anxiety, including a recent

study of college undergraduates which showed a general reduction in participants' anxiety levels after completing a self-portrait drawing exercise. Participants were split into groups and asked either to create literal self-portraits, to color mandalas, or to free draw. All three groups showed generally lower levels of state anxiety after finishing the activity (Becerra). This study's findings bolster the significance of art as part of a well-rounded life.

Psychological benefits arise not only from creating, but also from appreciating the arts. Visits to art museums, even brief ones, have been shown to reduce stress levels (Clow). The reduction of stress and anxiety promotes mental-emotional as well as physiological wellbeing. Everyone, or nearly everyone, experiences the phenomenon of stress at some point in life. Many people experience stress at levels that affect their physical health; high levels of stress are common among students, as school itself can be a major stressor.

Making time for art has social benefits as well. Creative play helps us form lasting connections with others. Interpersonal understanding, empathy, is essential for human connection. Through every stage of life, exposure to art and creation “foster[s] openness to novelty, encourage[s] connections to people, places, things, and concepts, and promote[s] the ability to take multiple perspectives” (Menzer). On the individual level, art helps people make friends, feel like they belong in their communities, and improve their family dynamics (Vlismas).

On a more macro level, engagement in the arts is shown to promote civic engagement. Researchers looked at the effect of “both audience-based arts participation and direct participation in the arts” on “three dimensions of civil society: Civic

engagement, social tolerance, and other-regarding behaviour<sup>1</sup>” (Leroux). In all three dimensions, they found a direct relationship. Making time to create or appreciate art leads to higher levels of individual investment in the welfare of one’s community.

In addition to the benefits of a direct education in the arts, there is a strong argument to be made for creative play as an effective learning tool in the non-arts classroom. A growing body of evidence suggests that arts-integrated curriculum improves students’ academic outcomes and enhances memorization of STEM material. Arts-integrated curriculum is any lesson which employs music, dance, theater, storytelling, poetry, visual art, etc. (Hardiman) (Robinson) (Peppler).

A 2019 study of 16 fifth-grade classrooms on the east coast compared the outcomes of arts-integrated science lessons versus traditional lessons on the same content. The arts-integrated lessons were found to be as effective or better than the traditional lessons. When the data was analyzed by student reading level, they found that “basic readers remembered significantly more science content learned through the arts” (Hardiman). This is consistent with previous research, which showed that “disadvantaged” students benefit the most from arts-integration (Robinson).

Ideally, arts in education should be a triad. Students would encounter art in three ways: dedicated art classes that allow them to create art, dedicated art/art history classes that deepen their understanding and appreciation of art, and integrated arts inside other curricula. Unfortunately, that is not the reality in the United States today. For most K-12 schools as well as institutions of higher learning, the second and third modalities on that list are few-and-far-between, and the first (direct arts education) is

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<sup>1</sup> “Other-regarding behavior” refers to the ways in which participants viewed individuals whose identities they did not share.

frequently under threat by budget cuts and administrative priorities (Hirt). Packed curriculums, overcrowded classrooms, and strict testing requirements push creative play out of the realm of possibility in non-arts subjects, where time and logistics simply do not allow for it. Thus, direct arts education classes become the sole domain of creative play in institutions. On top of that, teachers of the arts (that class of people who universally believe that art matters) must face a constant uphill battle to justify their subjects to the nonbelievers.

When budgeting time comes, arts subjects, often seen as non-essential, are among the first to be cut. School boards tend to prioritize college and career preparation. Also, arts are not strictly testable; the impact of arts classes is difficult to assess. Testing and easy assessment are bureaucracy-friendly, which equates to easily defensible budgeting data. Arts, therefore, are budget-unfriendly.

Often, when it comes to issues of funding or expanded access to the arts in education, the research about mental-emotional and social wellbeing are the arguments that advocates of arts education rely on. This makes sense; as demonstrated above, there is a wealth of empirical evidence to support art's role in students' mental-emotional as well as social wellbeing. However, in practice, do arts classrooms deliver on the promise of this idealistic rhetoric? Within all of these sciences that tout the therapeutic and developmental potential of art, the common denominator is creative play. Therefore, for an arts classroom to deliver on the promise of promoting wellbeing and supplementing learning, creative play should be foundational.

### **Falling Short on Creative Play**

Too often, arts classrooms recreate a capitalist ethos with an imagined hierarchy of value. Rather than centering on creative play, some pedagogical practices of the secondary and post-secondary level arts classroom perpetuate the myth that art is not for everyone. Students are taught to value their art as a product rather than a process, and to assign externally-defined worth (or ‘quality’) to their creations.

The studies explored in the previous section, alongside many others that reinforce their findings, demonstrate that art *is*, in fact, for everyone. Participating in some type of creative play is an essential aspect of mental-emotional wellbeing. In other words: art is a human need, and all art has worth.

### *Top-Down Tastemaking: An Enemy of Creative Play*

Unfortunately, arts classes can send the opposite message: that only certain art has value. Students who fail to measure up to their teachers’ standards are likely to receive the message that their art is *bad*, in the sense that what they created is not sellable or that audiences<sup>2</sup> will not connect with it. Truthfully, their work simply fell outside of their instructor’s tastes and standards – the same tastes and standards imposed on them through their own experiences as arts students. In other words, students are punished for creative work that does not follow the particular (white, academic) tradition in which their instructors were brought up. The institution of art education asks artists to carbon-copy their instructor’s tastes, which have been passed down from academic to academic as MFA programs spawned around the country.

For the creative writer, we call this set of arbitrary tastes and standards ‘the canon,’ or ‘literary writing,’ and it is a creative boot on all our necks. ‘Literary’ is loosely

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically upper-class, white, academic audiences.

defined; it is mostly an exclusionary term, built to denigrate works that stray too far from the white, realist, academic model of creative writing. In her book *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*, writer and writing teacher Felicia Rose Chavez describes literary writing as “not your common creative expression; it’s not genre entertainment for the masses. Literary writing has noble merit, in the tradition of the privileged white male figureheads. It’s infused with elevated purpose, grappling with complex truths and the profundity of the (privileged, white, male) human condition. ‘Literary,’ in sum, means gatekeeper” (Chavez).

Valorizing ‘literary writing’ as the top of some imagined hierarchy is problematic for a number of reasons. For one, who decides what is literary<sup>3</sup>? Chavez explores this question, pointing out that the answer is itself exclusionary, racist, and elitist: we call them “the masters” (Chavez). In the writing workshop, this phrasing is prevalent, even though its horror is right on the surface. Traditional artistic hierarchies like the one of “literary masters” recreate racist and sexist exclusionary practices, discourage creative innovation, and cause students to lose confidence in their own sense of artistic taste.

All artists need not glorify the “masters.” If a real, concretely true hierarchy of artistic quality exists for creative writing, then some readers’ opinions are simply *wrong*. What does it feel like to be told that your opinion is wrong? That your joy is wrong? This is the message that students who enjoy, for example, science fiction paperbacks are receiving from their creative writing professors who denigrate the genre, separating it from all that is true and right and *literary*. It is a bit like gaslighting to tell

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<sup>3</sup> Who decides, even, what qualifies as realism? Does anyone know, definitively, what is real?

students that their own tastes in art are unsophisticated and incorrect. Why not empower students' own tastes, instead?

These messages of artistic value sink into the classroom community, within and between bodies, because shared hierarchies are created using the powerful phenomena of love and hate. Devaluing of certain types of expression, or the expression of certain types of people, is an act of hate. Hate, unfortunately, has visceral power to connect people. As Sara Ahmed says of white supremacist groups, "Together we hate, and this hate is what makes us together" (Ahmed). Academic creative writers hate certain styles of writing together. A differing opinion on the hated texts becomes rebellion. To rebel against the held beliefs of the group is to other yourself, to open yourself to possible ridicule. Their own tastes having been dulled by the Pavlovian conditioning of these imagined hierarchies, students rely on their instructors to help them know what is 'bad,' so they can avoid expressing outlawed opinions.

In addition to outlawing the access to whole artistic movements (such as genre fiction), top-down tastemaking also works to outlaw personal emotion in the workshop. A traditional creative writing workshop demands silence from the writer in the hot seat. While the rest of the class discusses her work, the writer can give no input beyond what is on the page. In an insecure classroom, the discussion might consist more of posturing than of genuine attempt to connect with the piece of artwork (Chavez 34). For the writer, workshop is a time for listening and recording the feedback of the reader. The explicit instructions are to refrain from speaking; the expression of thoughts and emotions is forbidden. The implication, then, is that the writer is to say nothing, think nothing, and *feel* nothing during the workshop – nothing worth expressing, at least. The effect is that whatever they do feel is neither acknowledged nor welcome.

Emotions are obviously intrinsic to creating, or else creative play's mental-emotional effects would not be possible. Emotionality scholar Alison Jagger writes that emotions are socially constructed. "[C]hildren are taught deliberately what their culture defines as appropriate responses to certain situations: to fear strangers, to enjoy spicy food or to like swimming in cold water" (Jagger). The cultural construction of emotion does not stop in childhood, and therefore the shared culture of the writing workshop holds sway over participants' inner worlds. When people feel emotions that are rebellious, that are not congruent with expectations, Jagger calls these "outlaw emotions" (Jagger). Outlaw emoters have two choices: to embrace rebellion, or to repress.

Dominant classroom pedagogy (in all subjects) asks for a lot of repression. The teaching of most subjects attempts to be extricated from emotion altogether – an impossible task, of course. The emotionally-suppressed pedagogy of non-arts subjects is inimical to the teaching of creative writing, especially when it comes to feedback. If students think they are not supposed to feel anything about the feedback they receive, what happens when they do? By not recognizing the hurt that comes with criticism, we fail to realistically teach our students how to receive feedback on their art. For example, it's okay to reject feedback, but recognizing when that rejection is coming from a place of defensiveness is crucial. Students should recognize that creative growth is hard, but they should also be allowed to draw their own feedback boundaries. Expecting students not to feel is unrealistic; expecting them to keep their emotions to themselves is unfair (Beare). Making the space for rebellion against the silence of a traditional workshop gives students an alternative to repressing their outlawed hurts and angers.

Positive emotions, such as joy, are also at risk of repression in the classroom. In the opening of this essay, I told a story in which my joy over having created a piece of art was crushed by my teacher's application of arbitrary standards. When students receive the message that their own creative work is 'bad,' the likely outcome is shame. Shame generates the impetus to run and hide from the object of shame. Thus, students are likely to move away from the expressive medium they are 'bad' at, or worse, to quit creative play altogether<sup>4</sup>.

Shame sticks to painful memories like hot tar. A writer who never felt in sync with her classroom community, who could never comfortably align her work with the top of the hierarchy, may leave the classroom feeling ashamed. Later, when she has a new idea for a story or poem, the shame (which was conditioned by a community to which she no longer belongs) remains stuck to the act of creation. Which is to say, any time she attempts to approach writing again, she will feel shame. Ahmed describes what she called "the rippling effect of emotions; they move sideways (through 'sticky' associations between signs, figures, and objects) as well as backward (repression always leaves its trace in the present—hence 'what sticks' is also bound up with the 'absent presence' of historicity)" (Ahmed). A student who repressed her joy for writing science fiction, for the sake of her classroom community's imposed taste, faces an uphill battle post-graduation to recover that joy<sup>5</sup>.

### **More Rationale for Keeping Creative Play Alive**

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<sup>4</sup> Arts teachers should want to avoid this for many ethical reasons, but also for reasons relevant to their own livelihoods – driving away interest in their creative medium hurts retention in their departments

<sup>5</sup> This story will sound familiar to many who have been through a formal education in the arts. Oddly enough, it will also sound familiar to anyone who has experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

To tear down these destructive pedagogies requires a massive overhaul of arts education, particularly in the college creative writing workshop. This overhaul is necessary, because by perpetuating these classroom practices, arts teachers become our own worst enemies: we are creating a world with less art, and fewer artists. To make ‘bad’ art, despite the editorial opinions of past or present onlookers, is to engage in a radical act of kindness to the self. It is countercultural. It is the truest art that can be made.

Ironically, a capitalistic “career”-focused argument for arts access is not incompatible with a free and creatively playful arts curriculum. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers’ 2019 job outlook survey, the top two most in-demand skills for job seekers are strong written communication and problem solving (*Employers*). Students practice both of these in arts classrooms – including creative writing workshops. Arts skills translate to job skills. Besides, good mental-emotional health makes every job easier. However, when arts classrooms are overly focused on producing career artists, they employ dangerously elitist pedagogies, which confer neither job skills nor mental health benefits.

Arts classes must refuse to recreate elitism by decentering ‘mastery’ and centering creative play. Rather than teaching students an extrinsic hierarchy of artistic value, they can allow students to experience the benefits of artistic expression for themselves. It is possible to teach techniques for expression (in creative writing, this might be poetic forms, rhythm, imagery, etc.) without demanding absolute expertise as the goal. Let students define their own goals for self-expression. Teach them to talk about their art, and others’ art, free from the constraints of hierarchical or monetary value.

Some traditionalists might argue that these modes of determining worth will still find student artists. It is true that we don't teach in a vacuum; students may get unwelcome feedback elsewhere on their art or their artistic goals. But this only underscores my point. It is all the more important for students to build self-confidence in the classroom, to feel that their art is as close to true expression as possible, so that they are comfortable standing behind it in the outside world<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, given that teachers hold a position of authority in the classroom community, arts teachers are the *de facto* art experts in their students' lives, and thus their feedback carries added weight. Unwelcome feedback can be counteracted, at least in part, by the teacher's word on the matter, and by the confidence students build in class.

Clearing away outdated and elitist pedagogies also makes room for more exigent conversations in the creative classroom. For creative writers, this might include lessons on writing across identities, and conversations about cultural appropriation. Student artists can explore the anthropocene, discuss art in the age of the climate crisis, and experiment with new horizons and new media for artists on the internet. Classroom communities can collaborate on ideas for political action through artistic expression. Space should be made for these things, and all of them involve shifting the pedagogical mindset toward the belief that *everyone* is an artist, and that every artist must be allowed to have their own agency, as well as their own unique artistic taste.

Arts classes should focus on producing well-rounded people who continue to engage in creative play, rather than producing so-called 'successful' artists in the capitalist sense. Fostering the confidence and habitude for self-expression is far more

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<sup>6</sup> Creating art is akin to creating the self; it is agency distilled. Don't we hope our students will be able to create work that they, themselves, love?

important than imparting artistic skill and a taste for the ‘masters.’ Honing the skills and techniques of self-expression will come with time, but only if artists are empowered to continue to practice their craft, both within and outside of the classroom.

### **Closing and Transition**

In this Part One of the thesis, I provided evidence and rationale for valuing creative play as the central focus in arts education. I showed how the benefits of a playful arts education can ripple out into students’ greater lives and communities, as well as how the repression of play can lead to malignancies in arts classrooms. In the next part of this thesis, I will explore some of the attitudes and practices that repress creative play, as well as provide some suggestions for reform. In Part Three, I will illustrate specific examples of how I center play in my own classroom.

Because the remainder of this document concerns specific pedagogical shifts, I will narrow my focus to a specific set of teaching sites: the community college creative writing classroom. My teaching experience is predominantly based in the community college, and these are the students to whom I most chiefly connect. In Part Two, some of the linguistic shifts that I recommend may be applicable beyond this narrow setting (in other community college arts subject areas, and/or in other education-level creative writing classes). However, my fellow teachers of community college creative writing are my primary audience, and our students are my primary concern.

## 2: Creative Play Pedagogy: New Attitudes, New Language

### **Empower Every Artist: Pedagogical Shifts to Engage Creative Play in Creative Writing Classes at the Two-Year College**

The sign that greets drivers as they enter Nebraska from the east bears the state motto: ‘The Good Life.’ I first passed it in 2015, when I was moving to Omaha to get my MFA. More aptly, I was moving to Omaha to escape, once again, an unlivable situation.

The previous year, I had graduated from Purdue University with no job prospects. I had a research science degree in one hand and my other hand was (quite literally) broken, having just recently been assaulted in my apartment building. I financed a used Toyota with no down payment, thanks to a “new college grad” special at my bank, loaded it up with all my belongings and my cat, Otter, and headed out to Omaha, which I had picked based on a song and an acceptance letter.

For the first two months of my MFA, which carried no stipend, I lived in a stranger’s unfinished basement, sleeping on a cot that reeked of cigarette smoke. Before Christmas, I was able to upgrade to a musty high-rise on the edge of the nice part of downtown. The apartment was functionally a studio, due to massive water damage and a continuously leaking ceiling in the one bedroom, but it was plenty for me and Otter. We slept on a yoga mat on the floor. The twelfth-floor view of downtown was spectacular.

I managed to score a job as a baker in Omaha’s Old Market, with workable pay at \$8.50 an hour. Four to six days a week, I rolled down the hill to the Old Market at

sunrise, and spent all day lifting, mixing, scooping, and pulling cakes in and out of a hot convection oven. My classes were in the evenings, so the timing was perfect.

My first day in my first poetry class at the MFA, we were asked to introduce ourselves with our background. I didn't have much of a poetry background, nor did I understand the question. Instead, I poured out some of my traumas: that I had been raised in poverty by a drug addict who died when I was 17, that I had just left my college town and left behind an abuser, that I was struggling to make ends meet in a city where I knew no one, and that I was really happy to be here. My professor, a talented poet who would retire at the end of my first year, told us that day (and then again and again that year) that she would much rather have poetry students who had a "good ear" and a curiosity about language than to have students who "had a lot to say" and wanted to use poetry to say it.

After the MFA, some graduates are "placed" in entry-level teaching positions at colleges and universities – that wasn't my story. I kept working at the bakery for a few months after I graduated, until an acquaintance connected me with a part-time job at a college Writing Center. That was my introduction to the community college where I still work. Not long after, I was hired as an adjunct instructor teaching composition. At every opportunity, I made it known that I wanted to teach creative writing. Eventually, I told the right person, and scored my very first creative writing class.

### **Re-Creating (or Re-Thinking) MFA Pedagogy**

The dominant pedagogy of creative writing was born frenetically as creative writing graduate programs spawned into being and spread across the country. The Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in creative writing has a relatively short history in the

US; the first MFA program in creative writing was established in 1936 at the University of Iowa. This program, known as the Iowa Writers' Workshop, is still considered the height of prestige for creative writing students today. Other universities adopted programs to match it, and by the 1960s there were several MFA programs in creative writing established at universities across the United States. Often, these programs were helmed by graduates of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and employed the same pedagogical practices: studio classes with generative writing prompts, a focused study on literary works chosen by the professor, and the classical workshop in which the writer sits silently while classmates critique their creative drafts. These programs were designed to provide students with the opportunity to study creative writing in a graduate-level setting and to receive feedback and guidance from established writers – in other words, writers who already had MFAs, prominent publications<sup>7</sup>, or both. For most of this history, MFAs were peopled by mostly white, mostly male, and mostly independently wealthy students and teachers. They are advertised as exclusive, catering only to those deemed most deserving of the laurel.

Today, over 200 MFA programs in creative writing exist in the United States, and the degree is the standard for those looking to teach creative writing. But my MFA program did not teach me how to teach creative writing. Partly, this is because the university that I attended did not allow graduate students to teach. Still, there could have been a class, or even lessons within a class, on creative writing pedagogy; there were none. In retrospect, this failure to attend to pedagogy is not surprising. The future

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<sup>7</sup> The prestigiousness of publications is often determined by the publishing industry itself, rather than by readers or scholars. The publishing industry has its own exclusionary history, across which it beed largely controlled by white men with independent wealth.

that my MFA program seemed to imagine for its students was as writers only, not as future writing teachers. I'm sure they knew, though, that a sustainable career as purely a writer (a poet or a novelist) is an unrealistic goal in this century. For students like me, who came from poverty and were trying to find a way out, who had no start up money or familial support, this goal is downright impossible. Admittedly, not all of my classmates wanted to teach; but *I* did.

My first time teaching creative writing, I had to rely on guesswork and a recreation of my own creative writing education. I've come to realize that this is by design; MFA programs expect their pedagogies to be simply recreated by their graduates. I led students through the workshop as I had been workshopped. I asked them to stay silent as others commented on their work in ways that may have been useless or even hurtful. I assigned my favorite contemporary short stories and poems for them to read and talked to them about why these works spoke to me. I got them writing on day one, and asked them to share that writing for critique right away, teaching reactively instead of proactively. I carbon-copied my MFA professors, even though I, myself, had been damaged by these pedagogies<sup>8</sup>.

Worse, I did this in front of a classroom of twenty students who did not remotely resemble my MFA cohort. Students who come into an introductory creative writing class (at the community college as well as elsewhere) are diverse not only in terms of background and identity, but also in their aspirations: for the class, for their futures, and for their writing. A few of my students want to someday make a living as novelists. Some are already published authors, looking to deepen their understanding of craft and to

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<sup>8</sup> I had lost all confidence in my writing and hadn't written a poem in months.

make friends with other writers. On the other hand, many of them are simply looking for a place to be heard and to explore their own stories, their own emotions, on the page. In other words, they “have a lot to say.” Considering the research in Part One of this thesis, students are smart to choose an arts class for some catharsis and camaraderie! Engaging in creative work nourishes our mental health and promotes healing and community-building.

Each quarter, I meet creative writing students who have never taken a college class before, as well as students who have multiple degrees and successful careers, but have never formally studied an art. Creative writing counts as an art elective toward unrelated degrees at most colleges, and students see it as an opportunity for a fun, expressive outlet<sup>9</sup>. Students who self-select for creative writing at the community college run the gamut of experience, sensitivity, and confidence about their work. How do we design an introductory creative writing course that serves all of them?

Certainly not by repeating old patterns.

### **Old Catchphrases, New Classrooms**

The traditions of creative writing are preserved in colleges and universities by those who study and teach the subject, and as such, MFA graduates have the power to grow the field toward a more equitable and inclusive future. Scholars are already doing the optimistic and important work to revise the way the subject is taught. Ideas for transforming the college creative writing workshop exist; this conversation has boomed in recent years. My favorite example is Felicia Rose Chavez’s book *The Anti-Racist*

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<sup>9</sup> Later, in Part Three of this thesis, I will dig deeper into what motivates my students to sign up for college creative writing.

*Writing Workshop*, which takes on the racist and exclusionary designs of traditional workshop pedagogy. In the book, she lays out some of her own anti-racist classroom practices that readers can adopt, including (among other great ideas) diversifying the reading list, making space for students to be whole people, and publishing everyone (Chavez). Recent articles in places like *LitHub* and *The Writer's Chronicle* take on the challenge of imagining a better MFA – though writers lack a unified vision on the best way to do so (D'Aguiar) (Trommer). Is a better MFA one that is more integrated into the English department? Or more standalone, yet connected to the wider community? One that is rigorously devoted to challenging the writer? Or that offers students more experience with topics beyond writing? The debate is open and ongoing.

Also, creative writing teachers are working to expand *where* the subject is taught, and to whom. The creative writing workshop model has escaped the bounds of the MFA, and come to students of all ages, both inside and outside of big, storied universities. The Associate in Fine Arts (AFA) in creative writing is a growing trend, but at most two-year colleges, it is a fairly new offering. At my college, the creative writing degree program was founded shortly before I was hired; I'm part of the charter group that continuously designs and evaluates our curriculum and offerings. *Teaching English at the Two-Year College* had a special issue on creative writing in December 2014. Many of the articles therein were concerned with founding AFA programs at community colleges, and argued for the relevance of such programs, saying that they would increase overall retention at the colleges and catalyze lively community-building around their English departments (Bigalk). At present, not much literature exists on the actual teaching needs of the AFA program, and new teachers, like me, might feel forced to improvise, or to recreate the classical university practices for teaching creative writing.

Although the pedagogy scholars mentioned above are targeting university programs, some of the ideas are applicable to the community college AFA, too. The reverse is also true: shifts to modernize our pedagogy for the AFA can be useful at universities. My department at the community college is devoted to ensuring that all of our classes have reading lists that reflect the identities of our student population<sup>10</sup>. I'm happy to see many of my academic heroes, colleagues, and contemporaries dedicating themselves to changing and rethinking the teaching of creative writing.

Still, many antiquated lessons persist in today's creative writing classroom in the form of quippy catchphrases, such as "develop a good ear," "write what you know," "if you don't have time to read, you don't have time to write," and "garbage in, garbage out." While each of these might have some elements of truth, they should not be treated like sacred commandments, and they may do more harm than good if they are under-explained and over-used.

Recall from Part One of this thesis that engaging in creative practice is vital to one's mental-emotional wellbeing, and therefore any pedagogies which de-center or repress play should be revised. In the next few sections of this thesis, I will address each of the common catchphrases mentioned above, explain how they are applied in the creative writing classroom, and offer suggestions for revision. I intend to show how these phrases, and the attitudes that they betray, are unhelpful (or even harmful) in fostering of creative play, as well as how teachers might move toward better mindsets.

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<sup>10</sup> Our rosters and our reading lists are filled with black writers, Latine writers, writers who were previously incarcerated, writers from disenfranchised communities in the US, writers who are young, and writers who are queer. Also, 90% of the writing that I assign is written by people who are currently alive, to illustrate that poetry is not a dead thing from history.

*“Write What You Know”*

Though it is common and wide-reaching advice, “Write what you know” is astoundingly vague. What are teachers asking for when they use this phrase?

One interpretation is that “write what you know” asks for more confessional writing. Should students write what they know, though? What if all they know is a life they find utterly uninteresting, or a life they’d desperately like to keep to themselves? A single class at a community college might include high-achieving high school kids getting a headstart on credit, retired veterans, and parolees adjusting to re-entry. Although I believe that each of these unique students has a great personal story to tell, insisting that students use a confessional style (especially in a hybrid poetry/fiction intro course) is invasive. Students might fear that what they “know” will not be valued in the classroom, having received the message that their home life/culture is unimportant in the academic setting<sup>11</sup>. Granted, instructors who use this dictum are not necessarily insisting that students use a confessional style or write autobiographically, but will their students understand that?

On top of its potentially invasive connotations, “write what you know” is limiting and unrealistic. Of course, no novelist ever, including the so-called “masters,” wrote exclusively what they knew. What a fiction writer attempts to do is to write lies that are buyable. No, “write what you know” is not literal advice; it is a shortcut that comes up in difficult teaching moments. When we encounter students who want to write minoritized characters as stereotypes, what do we say? I understand the impulse to impose a “write what you know” rule in those situations – but resist it! This is a teachable moment.

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<sup>11</sup> Additionally, I would ask who benefits when diverse writers package their life experiences for academic audiences?

Student writers, especially white ones, must be taught not to appropriate other cultures for their own entertainment or profit. This lesson, though, deserves much more time and attention than a simple catchphrase.

Cultural appropriation is defined as “the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the practices, customs, or aesthetics of one social or ethnic group by members of another (typically dominant) community or society” (de Waal). To understand this definition of cultural appropriation, students need at least a foundational understanding of what it means to belong to the dominant culture, and how intersectionality creates pockets of dominance and oppression inside most of our identities. Incorporating characters whose identities are Othered should not be forbidden forthright, but this practice should be approached with sensitivity and respect. Students should be warned not to base their Othered characters on stereotype or hearsay, as well as to avoid making metaphor of someone else’s reality. This is a useful lesson for writers who hope to publish their work, and also a useful conversation for all of us as human beings, because it will help us avoid perpetuating harm (de Waal).

Kept as a pithy catchphrase, “write what you know” could have another, more useful meaning: it could encourage students to write the kind of work they like to read. Unfortunately, as I addressed in Part 1 of this essay, some instructors forbid their students from doing just that. A common practice in introductory writing classes, especially at the university, is to forbid students from engaging in ‘genre writing’ – a catch-all term for any work besides the stark realism of so-called ‘literary’ writing.

Professors might have their reasons for this rule<sup>12</sup>, but it is, by its nature, severely limiting.

Imposing the arbitrary hierarchy of the 'literary' is top-down tastemaking. Valorizing 'literary writing' as the top of some imagined hierarchy is problematic for a number of reasons. For one, who decides what is literary? Who decides, even, what qualifies as realism? The "masters" again? Traditional artistic hierarchies like that of the "literary masters" recreate racist/sexist/ableist/homophobic exclusion, discourage creative innovation, and cause students to lose confidence in their own sense of artistic taste. The hierarchy most academic writers inherit likely dates back to the first traditional MFA program, in Iowa, and who are they to decide what is valuable in the two-year college writing classroom? In the twenty-first century? Who were they to decide at all? No one has the right to define the worth of anyone else's art, nor the realness of anyone else's reality.

I would revise "write what you know" as a simple lesson: you have to *know* a genre to *write* that genre. If students want to write horror stories, they should read horror stories. If they want to write space operas, they should read space operas. I encourage my students to join the literary traditions that they admire, and teach them how to seek out focused information on those traditions and their constraints. As a romance writer myself, I am steeped in the genre's traditions, and I usually use it as my guiding example. For instance, early in the class, I teach about the "happily ever after" convention, which dictates that every romance protagonist must get a "happy" ending. This opens up a student-led discussion about why the convention exists, who it exists

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<sup>12</sup> I'll let them explain that elsewhere.

for, and how it functions. We talk about audience (i.e. why the romance reader might appreciate knowing that every book ends the same way.) In this way, I illustrate that no literary tradition is more valuable than any other, because each has its own audience with their own needs.

If “write what you know” refers to what students have read, rather than what they have lived, it is freeing. Students who have read extensively in their favorite genre are empowered to bring a level of expertise to the classroom. Writing teachers understand that reading intake influences writing output, and we could use this as an opportunity to buoy our students’ confidence. Instead, the next too-short lesson, “If you don’t have time to read, you don’t have time to write,” often has the opposite effect.

### *If You Don’t Have Time to Read, You Don’t Have Time to Write*

Teaching students to read like writers need not involve shaming them for how they use their time and energy. “If you don’t have time to read, you don’t have time to write” is eerily similar to the condescending maxim of the restaurant manager, “If you have time to lean, you have time to clean<sup>13</sup>.” When I heard this as an MFA student, I felt like throwing my hands up and quitting. I didn’t have time (or energy) for either, really – not while working a full-time, physically taxing job and coming to class. But I had to make time for writing, and to read my classmates’ work, or else why was I there? Outside of what was assigned, I had almost no stamina for reading the literary works that I felt I *should* be reading<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Because this is really a matter of one’s finite supply of focus and energy, not time.

<sup>14</sup> Or, more truthfully, the works I felt I should have already read.

How does one come to be considered “well read,” anyway? Writers and writing instructors should remember that class and racial structures influence everyone’s access to reading materials. I hadn’t read as many of the “classics” as my classmates by the time I got to grad school, partially because of the simple fact that I was born further from that goalpost, in a home without books, and lacking modelling of reading behavior. This need not be seen as a deficit for a writer, though – I had other knowledges, exposures, and experiences that my wealthier classmates lacked. This is true for every writing student; we all bring our own funds of knowledge into our present moment. This idea of a “well-read” student as one who is familiar with a singular, narrow list of books and authors called “the canon” is archaic.

Reading is important for those hoping to write, though, and learning to analyze texts from a writer’s perspective is a significant objective for a writing class. Reading the work of other writers opens students up to ideas of what is possible. However, this is only available to them if they are reading a wide array of works by diverse writers, rather than the dusty tomes of “literary” writing by dead white men, many of which are functionally indistinguishable from the next. Is this not the purpose of a class reading list? To expose students to new voices, new techniques, and new avenues for their own writing to explore?

Teaching students to read like writers means also empowering their tastes in written work. All writers need not glorify the literary “masters.” Let there be no such thing. If a set hierarchy of artistic quality *did* exist, then every reader would love the same books equally. Every person would have the same answer to the question “What’s your favorite book?” I can presume that no artist or writer *really* believes in a concrete hierarchy of quality. Who would want to live in that world? Yet, we’ve been conditioned

to believe that certain writers are more important than others – it's important to interrogate which ones and why.

In my creative writing department, we influence and borrow from each others' reading lists, to ensure that our own biases aren't precluding our students from discovering new styles. Although I tend toward poets who are women writing lyrically and confessionally, I also include more abstract language poems picked out by my colleagues. For each week's reading response, I make a wide variety of texts available, and let them choose a few to write about. When my section starts to express a taste for a certain style or genre, I seek out more work of that type to add to future weeks.

Oppose top-down tastemaking by offering students a reading list with a wide variety of styles and inviting them to be drawn to what appeals to them. Let them disagree with each other, and with you, about which of the texts are most appealing. Let them discover their own individual tastes, and congratulate them when they do, because this is what self-directed learning looks like.

### *“Develop a Good Ear”*

Exactly what constitutes a “good ear”? Whose definition do we use? Whose ears are “bad”? Did Biggie Smalls have a good ear? Does Nicki Minaj? Are ears quantifiable? Can a deaf person have a good ear? Does “earring” mean anything at all, or is it simply a way to create undue competition between students, inviting them to compare their innate poet-ness?

My understanding of the phrase “a good ear” is one that can sense rhyme and rhythm. My professor, when she venerated the “good ear” in the story at the top of this essay, seemed to imply that it is something with which a student is born, not something

to be developed through study. She made it clear that she did not want to teach our ears to hear, but that she expected them to already “hear” a certain way – to value the musicalities that she valued.

The ability to recognize rhyme and sense rhythm is a complex cognitive process which even neuroscientists do not fully understand. However, it is generally believed that the ability to recognize rhyme and sense rhythm is related to the way the brain processes language. Humans have a natural ability to recognize patterns in language, including patterns of rhyme and rhythm. This ability is thought to be related to the way the brain processes sound, the way it organizes language, and the way it creates/perceives time (Hallam).

An individual’s response to rhyme and rhythm is influenced by their language experiences and exposure to the spoken word. Each person’s English dialect influences not only what words rhyme for them<sup>15</sup>, but also which rhymes are pleasing. In composition studies, scholars have argued that standardized English is racist and exclusionary, because it de-values the legitimacy of Black grammar and syntax (Young). I would argue that any attempts to value “earring” are bound to de-legitimize some individuals’ rhyme-rhythm perception.

It is true that some people may have difficulty recognizing rhyme and sensing rhythm due to cognitive or developmental differences. To assert that these humans are incapable of being effective creative writers is blatantly ableist. Moreover, proficiency in sensing or producing rhythm/rhyme varies from person to person. Usually, though, if a person struggles to find rhythm and rhyme that work for them, it is due to a lack of

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<sup>15</sup> For example, does “park” rhyme with “lock” for you?

exposure to language and music. If an “ear” for rhythm and rhyme can be developed (which, in most cases, it can be), then the way to develop it is the same: by living. By trusting one’s own language sense. By listening, reading, writing, and finding one’s tastes.

If a student asked me how she should work on developing her “ear,” I would tell her to listen to music. I would tell her to sing in the car, and listen for the ways that the words rhyme (or don’t rhyme) in her favorite songs. It’s an opportunity to break down the arbitrary divisions between the types of creative work; music absolutely influences poetry and prose writing.

### *Garbage In, Garbage Out*

Lastly, the old classroom adage, “garbage in, garbage out,” has no redeeming qualities. Top-down tastemaking creates a great deal of shame in students who do not enjoy what they are told they *must* enjoy. This little catchphrase does some heavy lifting when it comes to shame. Rephrased, it could be: “If you like bad things, your writing will be bad.” While it’s true that what a writer takes in influences what they produce, each writer is capable of developing their own tastes, and “garbage” is an unnecessarily harsh and degrading term. Students hope to impress their instructors; they want us to like their writing. With this catchphrase, professors are telling them that they will never be liked, unless they effectively stop enjoying the things they enjoy (be it genre fiction, sitcoms, or reality TV), and spend their time and energy retraining themselves to appreciate (and write like) the “masters.”

At the community college, this catchphrase stands a good chance of being extra hurtful. For one thing, community college students (who are more likely than university

students to have full time jobs and dependents) have less time to retrain their tastes. Moreover, “garbage” is an especially hurtful term for those of us who have lived in poverty. Calling us trash, equating our culture and its artifacts to garbage, is a longstanding tactic of discrimination against us – think “trailer trash.” We know what wealthier, more educated, more privileged people mean when they say “garbage.” They mean *us*. It’s tough not to internalize this rhetoric, and by the time we’re adults, many of us have come to believe that we were raised on a diet of trash. The implication is that if we produce things that poor people (our own people) enjoy, we are producing “garbage.” Let’s just retire this cringingly judgmental catchphrase, please.

Without significant revision and expansion, old catchphrases of creative writing instruction are not fit for the modern classroom. There are as many ways to be a creative writer as there are writers. Instructors are responsible for empowering each of their student’s unique approaches and helping them find their way to self-directed learning. As such, lessons must adapt; they cannot be copied and pasted from writer to writer, classroom to classroom.

### **Offering Feedback Without Stifling Play**

Having addressed some of the attitudes which stifle creative play, in this section I will turn my attention toward the institutional structures in which creative writing classes must operate. Accepting the shifts in the previous section, which aim to empower students’ individual tastes and reject the notion of “good” and “bad” art, presents a new dilemma: how should a creative class be graded? In Part One of this thesis, I showed the myriad mental-emotional and social benefits of engaging in creative pursuits. So far in this section, I’ve illustrated that pedagogical attitudes can limit

students' access to those benefits by imposing an arbitrary hierarchy on their work. Grading is, by definition, imposing a hierarchy of so-called quality, but unfortunately, instructors are bound by the grading requirements of our colleges.

That said, a creative writing class is not a math class, and the two cannot be graded the same way. Turning against universal-style grading and feedback was a hard lesson for me as a teacher – one that I am still learning.

In a traditional creative writing class, the structure of graded assignments typically includes periodically workshopped creative pieces, workshop feedback for classmates (perhaps in the form of a participation grade), and a final portfolio with revised works. The grading criteria for these assignments varies on an instructor-by-instructor basis. Some grade based on task completion, others on the so-called “quality” of the creative works, or adherence to the creative parameters that they set forth in class. In my experience, there is little to no guidance on what creative writing students should write – usually just “write a poem” or “write a short story.” Students produce work, and then they learn. The lessons live solely in the feedback on that work. In this model, the teaching of creative writing is reactive rather than proactive.

The prompts and assignments in my introductory creative writing class offer more structure. They ask students to demonstrate that they are practicing a specific element of craft, as they are defined in our AFA program's learning objectives. The elements are Imagery, Musicality, Genre, Characterization, Point of View, Conflict/Tension, and Dialogue. We discuss and practice the elements in class together before they do their creative homework. This system was designed to break down the subject of creative writing into technical lessons, with the added effect that students' writing assignments could be graded more uniformly.

I've always believed it's important not to grade students on things I did not teach them (ex. document formatting if I didn't show them how to use Word), so each of the writing assignments attached to a particular element are graded solely on their use of that element, not on the overall "effectiveness" or value of the piece. I use a rubric with key terms from the in-class lessons and lectures. For a time, I thought that this objectivity, this one-size-fits-all approach to feedback and grading, was protecting my students from creative despair.

Then, in winter of 2021, a student sent me an email telling me that the feedback he had received from me throughout our class had hurt and frustrated him. I had penalized him for not meeting expectations<sup>16</sup> on the assigned writing prompts – not using enough concrete, sensory imagery in the Imagery prompt, say – without reacting to what he had written, and without giving him sufficient praise or encouragement. Shortly after his email, I learned that a friend of mine had been his high school creative writing teacher. She told me more about him. He was 18 and neurodivergent, and his high school creative writing class had made him feel as though he had *finally* found a part of school that he was good at. I knew that my clumsy, universalized criticism had hurt his confidence, and I felt horrible. I had to re-evaluate my methods, because the absolute last thing I want to do is to discourage creativity in my students.

I still support the structure of breaking down the introductory course into the elements of craft. It gives students an anchor, especially those who are new to creative writing and those whose confidence is shaky. For some writers, imagination and the impetus to start a project are the most difficult part of writing. A prompt that gets them

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<sup>16</sup> What is creativity, though, if not the bending and breaking of expectations?

started practicing a specific writing strategy is a gift to these students. But the key word is practice; I'm not asking them to demonstrate proficiency in each element. It is not ethical to ask a student for "practice" then grade them on proficiency.

An introductory class in the arts is all about practicing. Students hone newfound skills and receive feedback from their instructor and peers. If the grading of writing is either based on effort or on quality, and if this is a spectrum, I would lean more toward effort-grading as the ideal for creative subjects. On top of the subjective quality of art, students need the freedom to practice things they have not yet mastered. Practice is trial and error.

Grades are a simple carrot or stick situation. They punish or reward. In this black-and-white view, creative play should always be rewarded. After this experience, I have taken to grading students' creative work on completeness. I still use the rubric (points removed), but I offer plenty of qualitative and reactionary feedback as well.

### *Feedback on Prompted Writing: Teaching Students to Ask for What They Need*

In his essay "Welcome to Failure Club," Paul Feigenbaum argues for the importance of intrinsic motivation. "[S]cholars of motivation argue that in general people work with greater creativity, persistence, and focus when they find the work intrinsically rewarding" (Feigenbaum). Students who are intrinsically motivated to write creatively are more likely to try big, highly inventive projects. They may not want to follow prompts; they may not be able to focus on practicing one element at a time.

For their audiences (in this case, their instructors) to be caught up in focusing on the work's deviation from assignment expectations is a disservice to the writer's creativity. Most writers who have been through school have experienced a workshop in

which they sat mutely while their cohort held court on their writing in the most useless way<sup>17</sup>. So how do instructors make sure we are giving writers the kind of feedback that they want, that is useful to them? Each student has individualized needs; what if students were empowered to ask for exactly the kind of feedback they wanted/needed?

To make that possible, students must be taught to solicit and receive feedback. In order for them to ask for the responses that work for them, the classroom community (including the instructor) must have a shared vocabulary for feedback, which can be taught in an early lesson.

For students who will pursue publication of their work in the future, teaching the language of feedback has a secondary benefit. This may be their first (but not last) encounter with the language of editorial work: content editing, structural editing, copy editing, and proofreading. Substantive content editing, which usually costs more than the other types to outsource, concerns the creative bones of the piece. Structural editing concerns organization and flow. Copy editing and proofreading are concerned with grammar, as well as flow at the sentence-and-paragraph level.

Typically, in my creative writing classes, copy editing and proofreading are not a strong consideration. Some students, though, including those who may be English language learners, do wish to practice their written language skills in any and every applicable context. They may want to have their grammar checked. Coming to a creative writing class to improve one's grasp on the technical aspects of the English language is a smart and self-aware choice for these writers, as there is ample research data that backs

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<sup>17</sup> Once, when I was a second-year MFA student, my classmates used my twenty-minute workshop to argue about whether or not I was over-using the m-dash in my general body of work – so what if I was? – and gave me no feedback on the content of my poem whatsoever.

up the efficacy of arts-integrated learning (Robinson) (Peppler). Learning to self-proofread is easier and more fun when the writer has greater interest in the subject matter of their writing.

Of course, proofreading is extra time-consuming for the instructor; they may not be able to fully proofread each piece at a student's request, but they can at least devote *some* attention to grammar when the student asks for it. This is also a place where the instructor might recommend the college's writing center<sup>18</sup>, and if students are well-versed in asking for effective feedback, they will be prepared to engage with a writing center consultant.

### *Offering Praise as Critical Feedback*

Some aspects of feedback are linked inextricably to emotion. One of them is praise. Praise is probably the trickiest kind of feedback to ask for, because the best praise is unsolicited. Especially for an anxious or insecure mind, praise might roll right off without sticking. It might be hard for students to believe praise is genuine, especially when they asked for it. My philosophy is to assume that all my writers want to be praised; I find something good in all of their work, and compliment them on a job well done. They don't need to ask.

For some writers, though, praise is the only kind of feedback they want. They should know that this is okay, too. There's nothing wrong with being sensitive to criticism. Some traditionalists may argue that feedback is how writers grow in their craft, and without critical feedback, student writers won't learn. But praise *is* critical

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<sup>18</sup> If one exists. If not, creative writing instructors should be personally invested in supporting the creation of a writing center for this reason.

feedback. Writers who respond to suggestions and criticisms of their work with defensiveness, anger, and/or total heartbreak are not learning anything, either. Praise tells them what works, what's going well in their pieces, and what's worth preserving. The aspects that don't earn praise mean something to these writers; trust that they will think deeply about them. Positive feedback is still feedback.

Furthermore, a large number of students who come through introductory creative writing classes, especially at the community college, have no aspirations for writing the next great American novel or book of poetry. Many of them simply want to practice expressing themselves, or to try on creative writing as an artistic medium. For these students, bolstering their confidence in creative play is far more important than honing their craft skills. Student writers should not *have to* ask for praise, but they should be allowed to ask for *only* praise and validation, without criticism or suggestions, if that is what works best for them.

Art is good for a person's health; creative hobbies promote mental-emotional well-being as an essential part of a life well-lived (Mastandrea). Clumsy criticism can cause real harm to our students and our society, because it can convince students to abandon their creative pursuits. As teachers of creative writing, we should hope for a world with more writers in it, not fewer.

### *Teaching the Workshop*

Beyond empowering their own feedback needs, talking about responding to work with students will help them provide their classmates with helpful feedback, too. To respond to their classmates' work, students must first believe that they are capable of understanding the work, and that their opinions matter. In workshop, often the first

thing we ask for is a general impression of what the writer's work is communicating. This is not an easy question! In the past, the works that these students have read for their English classes most likely had an accepted interpretation: a wrong or right answer. In creative writing, they must be freed from that mindset. Students must come to believe that their interpretations are not only valid, but important for the writer to hear.

Some of them will need to be told so explicitly, especially when it comes to poetry. With the advent of Instagram and performance poets on Youtube, poetry has been enjoying a popular comeback in the US, but for some students, their only previous encounters with poetry will have been in English literature classes, where the poetry curriculum included almost exclusively the work of dead white men. Some of those dead white men (the Modernists) made their poetry complicated on purpose. Others were just writing to a different era and culture, and so, some of the beauty of their work has been lost in time and in layers of academic scholarship. No one explained this to the bored teenagers in English class, though, and as a result, they leave high school thinking that they hate poetry, or that they don't (and will never) understand it – thinking that poetry is a thing of the past, a dead thing.

One catchphrase I tend to use with all my creative writers is “Poetry is not smarter than you.” That applies to other forms of writing as well. “This piece is not smarter than you.”<sup>19</sup> I say this often about the published works we read, and make sure students know it when they sit down to workshop their peers. The most fundamental piece of feedback a writer can get is a general impression of what the work is

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<sup>19</sup> I picked this up from the poet Paul Tran while working as a youth poetry coach with the Nebraska Writers' Collective.

communicating; this lets them know if they achieved their intentions. Workshoppers need to believe that their interpretations matter, their questions matter, and even their confusion is valid. Sometimes, confusion is the goal for writers. Or, there might be something unresolved/conflicting in the piece, and the reader's questions will help guide the next round of revisions. Giving a general, neutral summary of what a work is communicating is not easy for a student who has been told in previous English classes that their reading of a text is incorrect. If instructors approach and introduce the workshop with care, creative writing classes can equip students with new faith in themselves as readers.

Having a shared language, so that each participant in a workshop can ask for what they need, is a matter of making sure everyone consents to the proceedings. Because critique is a crucial element of creative writing instruction, it is imperative, in an early lesson in each class, to break down the concept of soliciting and receiving feedback into a shared vocabulary. Once students are familiar with a shared vocabulary for feedback, they can ask for the specific responses that they will find most useful to their creative growth. At the top of each writing assignment, they can attach a brief cover letter that addresses their needs. To make this even simpler, the instructor might create a template or checklist page with which the student can indicate the types of responses they value for their work.

It's true, of course, that students in workshops will still have free will; we can't force them to abide by the parameters their classmates set. Hurtful things might still be said. However, it is still better to have a starting point for feedback. Instead of an intimidating free-for-all, students will have some guidance for where and how to focus the conversation. Furthermore, although we idealize the workshop as an egalitarian

utopia in which everyone's word has equal weight, it is only realistic to acknowledge that the instructor's word carries the most weight. Instructors hold a position of authority in the classroom community, and act as the de facto experts in their students' lives.

Unwelcome feedback can be counteracted, at least in part, by the instructor's word on the matter, and by the confidence students have built throughout the class.

In the next part of this thesis, I will continue to examine the creative writing workshop at the community college using examples from my own classroom. Part Three is an overview of teaching practices that center creative play. I will start broad, with the syllabus and course objectives, then move to the narrow as I explain some of the activities students do in my class. Along the way, readers will hear from my students about their motivations and expectations.

### 3 Creative Play Pedagogy in Action: Course Objectives and Activities

#### **Embracing “Fun” as a Course Objective: Creative Play Pedagogy in Conversation with Kairotic Pedagogy, Experiential Learning, and Student Self-Determination**

#### **Kairotic Pedagogy: Course Objectives and the Myth of Student Futures**

As covered in Part One, innumerable real-world benefits result from engaging in creative play. Because of this, creative writing classes can be loci of enhanced well-being that ripples out from the individual artists into their lives and communities. Especially at the introductory level and at open-access institutions, creative writing classes, when taught with creative play at the center, are opportunities for emotional healing as well as public service.

These benefits of creative play are only possible, though, when students approach the class with an experiential mindset, and a belief that when they create art for the class, they are free to explore their imaginative impulses. It is through this belief that they access the state of creative play. Creative play is defined by psychologists as any activities that allow participants to use their imaginations and express themselves freely. For a classroom to foster creative play, students must be invited to engage genuinely, imaginatively, and experientially in the act of writing, reading, and sharing. These values must be baked into our course objectives and activities.

In her book *Retention and Resistance*, Pegeen Reichert Powell argues against the importance of ‘transfer’ as a value in designing English courses at the college level<sup>20</sup>. After effectively showing that it is impossible for instructors to predict the diverse future situations in which our students will find themselves, Powell asserts that “not knowing challenges our sense of purpose, our curricula, and our pedagogies” (Powell p. 111). Rather than beginning course design by imagining a set of transferable skills that students will gain, Powell recommends choosing pedagogies that are “kairotic.” In doing so, she brings new meaning to the phrase ‘meeting students where they are.’ Sometimes, when instructors refer to meeting students where they are, their purpose is to pull these students *away* from where they are, and toward a place that is more classically suited to higher education. Powell rejects this, saying that “we begin where students are in order to demonstrate to them the role that writing can play in their lives right now” (p. 119). The creative-play-focused creative writing workshop necessitates such an approach.

The appeal of transfer as a staple of course design is obvious: we all hope that our students *get something* out of our classes. But what is that something? When creative writing teachers design our courses, what does ‘transfer’ mean to us? What do we hope transfers? For traditional pedagogues, as explored in the first two parts of this thesis, the central course objective is to improve students’ “mastery” of craft. Some instructors may hope to see their students get published<sup>21</sup>, which is admittedly tempting. I can’t deny that I feel a fierce pride when my students win awards or publications. Students

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<sup>20</sup> “Transfer” refers to the general concept of how skills and abilities gained in each class will aid students in their subsequent futures. It relates to the question “When will students use this in their lives?”

<sup>21</sup> However, there are legitimate issues with setting ‘preparing students for publication’ as a course objective, addressed more in depth later in this essay. Bringing publication pressure into the classroom means inviting in the gatekeeper.

also have much to gain from creative writing classes in the arena of (non-arts) career preparation; engagement with their own and their classmates' creative work is critical experience toward communication and community-building. For me, though, when I think of my students' futures, I ultimately just hope that they continue to engage with the practice of creative writing beyond the scope of my class, because creative writing is good for them.

Ironically, taking Powell's advice and de-centering transfer in my course design (and my overall pedagogical attitude) directly serves this goal. Students who enjoy the process of the class, who participate and feel good about their participation, are more likely to take on a positive association with the act of writing. A growing body of research indicates that "pedagogical flexibility in terms of student control, collaboration, and risk taking<sup>22</sup> have been identified as key ingredients in fostering creativity-friendly learning environments" (Buckton-Tucker). Valuing student writers' in-the-moment participation and reciprocating with kindness and sincerity (practices that fall under the general attitude of kairotic pedagogy), are excellent ways to boost creative engagement.

Moreover, valuing participation over preparation (de-centering the idea of transfer) will benefit students who, as they say, fall through the cracks. Even if students never pick up another poem or approach another short story for the rest of their lives, they will benefit from participating in the creative process during the short span of weeks that they encounter our workshops, because of the myriad mental-emotional and social benefits of creative play.

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<sup>22</sup> This list reads like a description of creative play.

There is a catch, though; to reap these benefits, they have to genuinely engage in the act of participating as writers, readers, and community members. Therefore, kairotic pedagogues must value engagement as a fundamental objective.

### **Experiential Learning as Kairotic Engagement**

The type of learning that takes place in creative writing classes is innately experiential. Experiential learning, a term that was popularized in the 1980s, refers to “Learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with the learner who only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities but never comes into contact with them as part of the learning process” (Kolb). When students participate in a creative writing class, they are engaging in experiential learning, because they are *doing* creative writing, not merely pretending to write or *preparing* to write. Even though some of the activities and prompts in my introductory class are focused on a single element of craft, and students are not asked to produce what we might call ‘whole’ works, the students are still participating in the act of creative writing – they are doing the very thing that they are learning.

Engagement is crucial for experiential learning. To be ‘directly in touch with the reality being studied,’ the student must make a choice to alter their personal reality, to open up to the experience. In creative writing, they must believe that what they are writing right now has value; they must believe that they are creating art, not simply engaging in school work or preparing to create art. This belief that they are creating art opens them up to receive the healing, the growth, and the other meditative benefits of creative play. In this way, kairotic pedagogy and experiential learning are kindred: both pave the way for creative play by centering student engagement in the real task of writing.

In the context of creative writing, ‘engagement’ ideally means actively writing new work that they care about; reading their classmates’ work and providing interpretive feedback; responding to class readings with an eye toward writerly analysis and taste-building; and maintaining an openness to trying new techniques and approaches. A creative writing course designed for kairotic, experiential learning would use these items (or similar ones) as course objectives, rather than objectives focused on preparation or the building of so-called skill or “mastery.”

As a result of engaging with these objectives, students may come to see themselves as writers, thereby developing a positive artistic/writerly self-image. They will directly experience what it is to write creatively, as well as to be part of a community of writers. As Buckton-Tucker explains, “Seeing and discussing the work of others also helps dispel the myth that writing is some rarified process for a literary elite,” further lending to the possibility of student writers taking on a writerly identity (Buckton-Tucker). This experience, as well as the resulting positive changes to the student’s self-image, increases their likelihood of continuing to write in their post-class lives.

### **Self-Determination and the Expectation of “Fun”**

One of the ways that Powell promotes her kairotic pedagogy is by asserting that ideas of ‘transfer’ are wishful thinking at best, and hopeless at worst. The very act of designing course objectives for transfer requires the teacher to imagine a future for their students. Often, that future looks like a stereotype: a four year degree, possibly graduate school, and a middle-class white-collar career. This prerequisite imagination is both presumptuous and often false, because students will go on to lead divergent lives. Not all of them will continue in academia, nor into careers that expect mastery of any particular skill we might frame for them.

In creative writing, the particulars of this stereotypical future might be different, but the falsity of it remains the same. The future that creative writing teachers might imagine for our charges is idealized: perhaps writing ‘publishable’<sup>23</sup> work and/or enrolling in an MFA program. While those things are nice goals for some of our students, not all of them even want these things.

And what they want matters.

For those that harbor no desire to share their work beyond the class community, the insistent pressure to publish (or even to desire publication) can be detrimental. It can lead them toward the idea that ‘real’ writers want and/or achieve these things, and therefore they themselves will never be ‘real’ writers. Worse still, some instructors may go so far as to internalize this hierarchy themselves, and then to perpetuate this dangerous idea that art belongs only to an arbitrary, elite class of people. How do these instructors treat their less-inclined-to-publish students, or those less inclined to write ‘literary’ work? Do they offer them the same experience? Is their creativity nonetheless fostered?

Powell counters this harmful false-futuring with kairotic pedagogy, de-centering preparation in favor of participation. Similarly, creative play pedagogy emphasizes freedom of expression, the demolition of artistic hierarchies, and creative engagement as a fundamentally worthwhile endeavor. The foremost tenet of creative play pedagogy is that making art benefits artists and their communities, full stop. Art is for everyone. Building on this belief, we can also allow our students to not only create art for art’s sake, but also allow our arts classes to be ends in themselves.

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<sup>23</sup> As defined by the traditions of the academy. See also: ‘literary.’

Accepting this, students can self-determine their outcomes.

At the beginning of every creative writing class, I ask my students what they hope to gain from the course. More specifically, I ask why they are there in the first place. In synchronous<sup>24</sup> classes, we do this as a go-around. The question serves as an icebreaker, and our very first opportunity to share aloud with the class. In asynchronous online classes, it takes the form of an optional “Introduce Yourself!” discussion board post during week one.

Over the last two years, I’ve taught two asynchronous creative writing classes. From the discussion boards from these two classes, I’ve amassed twenty student responses detailing their individual expectations for the class. The prompt asked these students to: “Include a short description of why you decided to take a creative writing class as well as any experience you have with writing creatively.” I looked through the responses for trends, and found that the majority of students (seventeen out of twenty) came to the class with expectations of positive affect and/or community. They hoped to have fun, to be part of a community, to read and to share, and to have their pre-existing “love” of the subject reinforced.

#### *Self-Determination: Students Expect Fun and Play, Community and Sharing*

Fourteen out of twenty responders directly referenced positive affect as their rationale behind registering for creative writing. This took the form of expressing a pre-existing “passion” or “love” for the subject and/or an expectation of fun, as well as mentioning childhood creativity and play. Several of them mentioned having enjoyed

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<sup>24</sup> Classes which take place in real time, either in a classroom or online using video chatting software (i.e. Zoom.)

previous writing-related classes, both creative writing and composition, which also connotes an expectation of enjoyment and “fun” in the class in question.

Some of these responses included:

- “My favorite classes I've taken so far at [this institution] have been my English classes, because of that I wanted to take this course. I thought getting the chance to write more freely would be a great thing to try out.”<sup>25</sup>
- “I decided to take creative writing as one of my last classes because it is something I have truly enjoyed since I was even in 1st grade!”
- “I hope to have fun learning and writing with everyone.”
- “I decided to take this Creative Writing course because I really enjoyed the creative writing class I took in high school and wanted to see what it would be like at a college level. I love to read and write stories and I feel like creative writing gives you a lot of freedom to write whatever you feel like and I'm super excited to start this class.”
- “I used to absolutely love writing when I was younger, short stories and novels! I have let that creativeness flow into more of a visual art aspect, but I am taking this class as I want to connect back to those writing roots.”

Another nine of the respondents (with some overlap) reported that they wanted to be part of a class community. They expressed desire to read their classmates' work, and an excitement to share. One of the students above wrote that she hopes to have fun learning and writing “with everyone.” The acknowledgement of her classmates was

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<sup>25</sup> She was not the only one to mention freedom – a core aspect of creative play.

striking, especially since the class was fully online and asynchronous. The students never met each other in real time.

Some of the community-focused responses included:

- “Hope that we can all get along and help each other progress in our writing”
- A student disclosed that he is “extremely dyslexic,” then wrote: “Writing is the [pinnacle] of human understanding and connection and the utilization of story and its many characters is how we as a species express that connection to one another. [...] I look forward to this class and look forward to seeing what everyone comes up with.”
- “I look forward to engaging with everyone's work.”
- A student disclosed that his best friends had recently moved away to other colleges, then wrote: “I took creative writing due to the fact that I believe writing to be the best way to express what goes on in my head. Having nobody to talk to there's a lot of thoughts in my head that I've wanted to get out.”

These responses, especially the first set, are littered with the diction of positive affect, strongly indicating an expectation for “fun.” In addition to explicit use of the word “fun,” writing is called a “favorite” subject, and there is mention of enjoyment, excitement, freedom, and love. Notably, they also refer to their childhoods or “roots” in these responses, connoting a longing for childlike playfulness.

Though my sample size is small, I believe this trend – positive affect as a major reason that students register for creative writing – will hold. Based on what I’ve observed in my classroom through the years, fun is a common motivator. The go-

arounds from the synchronous classes are kairotic in and of themselves; they are born from that particular moment, in a space and with a community of people, and in that moment they evaporate. As such, there is no formal record nor any quotations from these sessions. However, as an observer of several of these go-arounds, I can attest that the general sentiment of “I’m taking this class for fun,” is equally common there.

What is “fun,” though? Of course, “fun” is subjective. The pursuit of fun looks different from person to person, and even within a single person across time. Fun is kairotic, derived instantaneously. “Fun” can be defined as the opposite of boredom. Educational theorists, those who study the psychology of creativity, learning, and development, and even computer scientists who study artificial intelligences have identified the fun-boredom spectrum as a driving pedagogical force, and an important element of intrinsic motivation (Cordova). Requisites of fun include novelty (but not too much), surprise, and freedom (Schmidhuber). Mostly, fun and play are studied in children, but there is no reason to believe that its effectiveness as a learning tool drops off in adulthood. Intrinsic motivation and fun are cyclical; each can be derived from the other. When a task is fun, people are more likely to *want* to complete it. “Having fun” is nearly synonymous with “feeling good.”

When it comes to creating art, fun is a logical companion. The mindset of play makes creativity both enjoyable and rewarding. As we create poems, we surprise ourselves in the juxtaposition of images and sounds. We are challenged to rethink our experiences, placing them into the medium of language. In writing prose, we are challenged to create rounded and empathetic characters using language alone. Challenge is integral to fun, as is surprise. Boredom, fun’s opposite, tends to result from a lack of challenge or novelty (Schmidhuber). Additionally, creativity can lead to

satisfaction – writers may find satisfaction in looking over their finished works. The class/workshop takes this satisfaction a step further, giving student writers an immediate opportunity to share the fruits of their efforts. Ideally, the practice of sharing leads to connection between writers – another important marker of fun.

Community and fun go hand in hand. The students in the second set of responses (above) looked forward to participating “with everyone,” saw the class as a cure for loneliness, or generally indicated hope for connection with classmates; these students are onto something. Although research into fun is limited, the body of it that does exist shows a strong correlation between companionship and enhanced sense of fun. In a three-pronged study of the affective state associated with fun, researchers found that “fun experienced when interacting with others is more positive than solitary fun” (Reis). In other words, people have more fun when we are together.

Creative writing classes offer two loci of experiential learning: the first is writing, and the second is sharing. When writers are read, their art begins to perform as expression. When they receive interpretive feedback in class, they are offered the opportunity to see their work through the lens of the reader. They get to see whether their intentions for the work match its effect on the reader. Through sharing, student writers come to know the experience of being known, being seen, through their work.

Because of this, workshops must be supportive environments, free from the elitist hierarchies that are sometimes placed on art, in order to be effective sites of experiential learning. A supportive writing workshop does not prioritize judging the so-called ‘quality’ of the works in question. To do so would be to invite the arbitrary standards of the academy and the publishing industry into the room. They have no place there. For one thing, like most institutions in America, both publishing and academia have their

roots in white supremacy, ableism, and patriarchy. Also, though, an expectation to dissect and review a written work for its ‘quality’, to place it on a non-existent hierarchy, gets in the way of readers’ honest responses and interpretations. These honest impressions are the most valuable thing to a writer, because they can be used to determine whether a draft is accomplishing its intentions.

Removing the pressure for student readers to value-judge the works also makes workshop participants more likely to be friendly toward one another. If ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are treated as absolutes, students may feel that they are being judged for their tastes. As such, they will try to obscure or adapt those tastes, rather than risk the embarrassment of being ‘wrong’ about a text’s merit. Being beholden to a hierarchy does not feel good for the writer or the reader; it does not invite genuine connection.

Noticeably, none of the student responses included anything about publication. I don’t think this indicates that *none* of them are interested in getting their work published in the future; publication is a high form of affirmation, and some will seek it. However, because “I want to be a published writer” seemed far from the primary motivation to enroll in the class, building toward an assumed threshold for publication as the primary course objective would be a mismatch to student self-determination. This is yet another reason to de-center the assumed tastes of the publishing industry.

Students’ apparent lack of interest in publication should not be confused for a reluctance to share their work, though. To the contrary, many of them expressed excitement at the prospect of sharing their work with the class. What is the ultimate goal of publication anyway, if not to share one’s art with a public? Students are achieving at least some satisfaction toward this goal simply by having an audience: their classmates. The experience of sharing in workshop is an opportunity to learn one’s writerly self-

image, to see one's writer-self through the lens of a community of readers. Therefore, it is important that workshop should be a soft landing space for student writers.

Some of the above student responses show that, coming into the class, students already know that they want to have “freedom” in their creative pursuits. This is impressively self-aware; they understand that producing artwork under conditions of free expression is most likely to lead to artistic fulfillment, and to fun. Creative play pedagogy exists to combat the notion that “art” belongs only to a glorified elite class of people. This notion leads artists to self-loathe and to self-censor, in favor of mimicking the voice of so-called “mastery.” When an artist is free from the constraints of elitist expectations, they create work that is more organic and honest. When readers are free from the expectation to review and rate their classmates' work, their feedback is more honest, kind, and useful. Centering creative play means insisting that there is no artistic hierarchy, that art-making belongs to everyone. With these beliefs, can we foster a community that truly values free expression, community, creativity, and fun.

### **Methods for Bringing the Fun: Some Suggested Attitudes and Activities**

As a lifelong introvert, I don't necessarily consider myself an authority on “fun.” That said, can anyone definitively say what makes an experience a fun one? Because fun is subjective, it is easier and more realistic to start with “play.”

Play is a subject heavily studied by psychologists, especially traumatologists and those that work with child development. It is a cultural universal, generally considered a healthy and even necessary behavior. Jean Piaget connected play to learning, theorizing that play helps children exercise their cognitive abilities, and allows them to incorporate new information into existing cognitive structures (*APA*). Play is a process of

exploration and discovery, using imaginative action and quick decision making, to observe unknown outcomes. It is in the appreciation of these unpredicted outcomes that we arrive at “fun.”

So, what conditions stimulate play? Certainly, freedom is important, as experimentation and exploration require the player to act freely. Safety (or a feeling of relative safety) is another requirement. To engage in play, we must believe that we are safe from physical, mental, and emotional harm. For most, this includes safety from ridicule<sup>26</sup>. Adults may be less prone to playfulness, due to years of cultural training telling us that we must act with certainty and purpose, and that we must be mistake-averse. Therefore, in order to coax adults into playfulness, it helps if the stakes are low.

### *Lower the Stakes*

Low-stakes activities and assignments can also help build trust and community in the creative writing classroom, especially when they are used early in the term. Used late in the term, they can help relieve the stress as students move toward their final projects. Risk-taking is an aspect of play, but too much at risk can stifle playfulness – high stakes reduce a person’s willingness to engage in risk-taking.

One practice for lowering the stakes is to provide students with ample ungraded writing opportunities. Ungraded writing has lower stakes than graded writing. Teachers might use prompts and allow in-class time for free-writes, then give students the option to share (either in small groups or with the whole class.) The spontaneous snippets of creative writing that students conjure in these moments are confidence-builders and

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<sup>26</sup> We are never truly safe, not even from ridicule. However, relative safety can be achieved. Workshop facilitators can safeguard their charges from ridicule by reducing the overall seriousness with which creativity is regarded. In part, this can be achieved by rejecting the elitist hierarchy of artistic ‘skill.’

community-builders. Students write to a shared prompt in a shared space and time, then, by sharing, they get to see the similarities and differences between their creative consciousnesses. In sharing their spontaneous writing, they show each other new possibilities.

Bringing in a variety of prompts for these activities casts a wide net, so that students will be more likely to enjoy at least some of them. There are, of course, books and websites filled with poetry and prose writing prompts – sometimes I borrow these (Behn). Other times, the prompts are my own invention or adaptation, often inspired by the class's population or the ideas we have already explored together. I keep a binder of these writing activities so I can revisit them with future groups. Sometimes, I'll use mentor texts: short poems or pieces of prose that the students can imitate or take inspiration from. Sometimes, I invite them to bring in their own mentor texts.

A favorite activity of mine is based around students' favorite songs. I have many variations of this activity, but it always starts with asking students to bring a song they love to class with them, as well as headphones and a device to play it on.

For the first phase of the activity, students put everything else away and simply listen to their song on repeat (for approximately five minutes or so) without any distractions. For many, taking in music without distraction is a rare occurrence. In our culture, we tend to listen to music while doing other things: driving, cleaning, doing homework, etc. For many students, listening to music mindfully is a new experience, meaning that even this first phase is consistent with experiential learning and the exploration/discovery that constitutes fun.

In the next phase of the activity, they write while they listen. The prompt for this writing time can take a few different forms, from broad to specific. Some easier

possibilities are to ask them to write about a personal memory associated with their song, or to write a piece generally inspired by whatever the song evokes. Another possibility is to ask them to perform a casual literary analysis of the song's lyrics, to identify what's happening in the song the same way they would in any other text. Then, with this analysis, they can create their very own writing prompt based on the song<sup>27</sup>. The possibilities don't end there.

I love this activity because it teaches students to value their own tastes. Using the high-brow term "literature" to refer to students' favorite songs empowers them as it works against the elitist gatekeeping associated with that term. It's also accurate. Songs *are* literature, because literature is any written work that is "considered of superior or lasting artistic merit" (OED). When written work is included or excluded under the definition of 'literary,' it comes down to *who* is doing the *considering*. This activity helps teach students that they can be their own determiners of artistic merit.

In Part Two of this thesis, I discussed the way top-down tastemaking manifests in creative writing classrooms, and how it stifles creative freedom. Empowering students' embodied tastes is the antidote. Playing with this song activity, in which students bring their own musical taste into the room, offers an opportunity to directly discuss artistic taste. The song activity could also couple organically into a conversation about "earing," and how one's tastes for sound are shaped by and with their appreciation for music. Allow space for the creation of student-led "reading lists" of music, in the spirit of the revised "write what you know" attitude. Songs as mentor texts can easily lend

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<sup>27</sup> If time allows, they can trade these writing prompts to their classmates, and spend a third phase of the activity responding to the one they receive.

themselves to discussions about rhyme and meter, assonance and alliteration, and all things musicality.

### *Gamifying Writing*

Another fun-seeking pedagogical practice is to gamify the learning activities. Gamifying means, quite simply, turning them into games. The games can be competitive (free-for-all or teams) or collaborative.

Gamifying supports learning in a few ways. Games feel like play, rather than work. When a lesson is gamified, it automatically feels like the stakes are lower. Players are most likely to focus on winning the game, which allows the existing stakes of school (grades, pressure toward mastery) to fall away. In pursuit of gaming and winning the game, players experiment and explore. Games encourage us to try our own methods, both alongside and in place of those that we've been trained into. This is why we call it "gaming the system" when individuals find creative ways to achieve their ends. Gaming is fun in part because it provides immediate feedback on a player's actions and experimentations, which can, as we know, reinforce learning. Overall, games are a perfect companion to experiential learning.

Creative writing lends itself easily to guessing games. In my MFA, we played a game where we each imitated the style and structure of a specific Mary Ruefle poem, submitted our work anonymously, and guessed whose resulting poem was whose. It was fun and hilarious searching for each person's fingerprints in the poems – and the class's guess accuracy was surprisingly good! – but it was also a great learning experience. In trying to suss out each person's style, the class talked at length about patterns we had seen in each others' work. I may never have been aware of these patterns in my own work without that lengthy conversation that exposed them. As an MFA cohort, we had

fairly intimate knowledge of each others' writing quirks, but intimate knowledge is not necessary for guessing games to work. They can be fun even if the guesswork is less personal, or the guessing is way off base.

In my poetry studio class at the community college, I have adapted the song activity into a guessing game. We begin with a playlist; each participant (including me) submits one song anonymously. I prompt them to choose a song that they find inspiring, or a song that they would put on their own "Writing Playlist." As curator of the playlist, I am the only one who knows whose song is whose. During class (in the room or on Zoom), we listen to the entire playlist once, and we listen without distraction. Then, I play the playlist once more, during which time everyone drafts a small piece of writing: it can be a poem, seeds/notes for a poem, or something more prosaic. I prompt them to take inspiration from one of the songs on the playlist other than their own. After the writing time, we begin our guessing game. Each player shares a bit or all of what they wrote, and the other players guess which song inspired it. Players get one point for each correct guess, and two points each time the correct song is the one they contributed. At the end, we tally these points, and the highest total wins.

Like the Mary Ruefle imitation game, this one also asks students to deeply analyze their classmates' work. As they listen, they look for clues in the writing that mirror the emotional tone or the imagery of one of the playlist's songs. The deep listening they do during the game is different from what they do in workshop, because they are not listening with the intent to respond, simply with the intent to understand the work in a new way. The game also builds community, because players must choose an anonymous classmate's song as inspiration. When that classmate is revealed, a spark of kinship flares. A gift of inspiration has been passed between them.

Perhaps the most common game in creative writing classes is not a winnable one, but a collaborative one: the traditional “exquisite corpse” parlor game, whereby students pass around a sheet of paper and write a poem line-by-line. Each player can only see the previous line. They write a new line, fold the paper to obscure all but their own line, and pass the sheet to the next player. This game can be spiced up in an infinite number of ways, such as adding additional limitations like required words or themes. The words or themes themselves can be drawn from a hat to increase randomness. At the end of the game, each person reads aloud the sheet of paper they are holding.

This game is a deconstruction of poetry writing. It focuses on the solitary line, and its juxtaposition with the lines around it. Each writer can only be influenced by a single prior line, so they must carefully read and re-read it and learn its aspects and patterns in order to play off of it. Then, when the whole poems are read in the end, they get to experience the surprises of how the hidden lines work together and contrast each other. Sometimes these surprise juxtapositions are profound; often they are funny. Both of these effects are novel and unpredictable. That unpredictability, coming up as immediate feedback to the students’ efforts, is the very definition of fun.

### **Creative Play Forever**

Centering creative play in my pedagogy is an act of love for my students, my community, and myself. It is an attitude of resistance against the product-focused, hierarchy-obsessed culture of neoliberal capitalism. Spending time engaging in creative play is a proven antidote to the ills of contemporary culture: it heals, reduces anxiety, creates lasting bonds of friendship, and boosts empathetic engagement in civics. I aim to invite my students to dispense with the obsessive need to be efficient or quick, instead

valuing the passage of time spent inside the freedom and unpredictability of play. The products of such an act and attitude go far beyond the artifacts we make; the products are the invisible boosts to the collective wellbeing of mankind. These are my course objectives.

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