

Creative and Critical Engagement: Constructing a Teen Vision of the World

Two high school teachers and their students collaborate on student-written and student-edited anthologies of creative writing.

Today's high-stakes testing world has changed the English classroom a great deal, and perhaps one of the most dramatically affected areas has been that of creative writing. As all English teachers well know, creative writing doesn't easily lend itself to a multiple-choice test or a five-paragraph essay. As two teachers caught up in the push to prepare students for state tests—in our case, the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment, or PSSA—we have struggled to work creative writing smoothly into the curriculum. It not only fails to mesh with the testing focus but also fails in making clear connections to literature.

English classrooms often treat—and, through high-stakes testing, are often forced to treat—a work of literature like an animal on a dissection table. Each story, poem, or book needs to be analyzed for tension, irony, metaphor, status symbols, etc., and this dissection is never linked in any way to creative writing, even though the works being analyzed are, in fact, often creative works.

While we believe that the breaking down of complex societal tasks—such as breaking down literature studies into creative writing and criticism or analysis—can be helpful for students, there is also a time when students need to see the bigger picture and identify how their many skills relate to one another under the large umbrella of a field of knowledge that humanity has developed.

Tired of both working around testing pressures and the false dichotomy of creative writing vs. textual analysis, we decided to create an extended unit

that attempts to tie the acts of creation and reception together and allows students to experience writing and literature by putting them to work for the students' purposes. We incorporated creative writing over an extended period of time (about five months) in a manner that allowed our sophomore students to write creatively and to engage their work—and the work of others—critically on completion.

To begin, Ryan, now in his fifth year of teaching, went back to the writing text from his undergraduate methods course: *Inside Out*, by Dan Kirby, Dawn Latta Kirby, and Tom Liner. The opening chapter of that excellent work contains information that drove the initial formation of the unit. First, the belief that “all kids have unique and worthwhile thoughts and language in their heads” (2) planted a thought in Ryan's mind. He saw the opportunity in this unit for the students in both of our classes to describe the world as they experienced it. From then on, we referred to the unit as The Mid-Teen Experience, and we decided that their creative writing would focus on how they experienced the world. The decision for us to combine our classes for the writing portion of the unit was inspired by what Kirby, Kirby, and Liner call “Belief 1,” which is that “Writing is social and is best taught in a collaborative and communal setting” (4). Periods of great literary flourishing throughout history have involved writers interacting with one another, both through written text and conversation. We wanted to mimic that as best we could by combining our classes and encouraging a healthy interplay of ideas among students.

The final thought that finished the structure of the unit was the passing observation in the description of “Belief 2,” that “Writing is complex, high-level human behavior” (Kirby, Kirby, and Liner 4). Writing is not easy, and creative writing even less so. We wanted and expected students to become emotionally involved with their work, and this would lead to complex difficulties

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when students began expressing their thoughts and feelings. Since the process is so complex, we decided to opt on the side of safety and give extended time to what Kirby, Kirby, and Liner described as the four steps of creative writing: “getting started,” “getting it down,” “getting it

right,” and “checking it out” (16). The step that we believe separates our work from other units that take the same steps is our final “checking it out” step (16). We chose to use this step not as an opportunity for revision—we contained that in step three—but an opportunity to allow students to act as anthology editors in a collection of work that reveals the complexity of the life of a mid-teen.

The Initial Experience

We began our writing with twelve 20-minute sessions of freewriting spread over three months. During the first session, we gave our students small composition books and explained the goal of The Mid-Teen Experience: to let them show us the way in which they experience the world. We told them that they could express themselves in poetry, plays, songs, stories, or any other manner they chose. We gave them 20 minutes once per week to freewrite as much as they possibly could about whatever they wanted. We collected the journals at the end of each period and reviewed them regularly. If any students wrote about something they didn’t want us to read, they could make a note at the top of the entry to let us know. Erica, currently in her fourth year of teaching, created a dozen freewriting prompts related to The Mid-Teen Experience theme to give students who were unsure of where to go to get something to latch on to or spark an idea.

Introduction to Students

We introduced the project to our students by focusing on three things we believed would immediately engage their interests. First, we explained that the students would be embarking on a collaborative project that would allow them to interact and work with students in another class. Next, we explained how the anthology aspect of the unit would result in a collection of both classes’ final works that they would be able to save and share with their families. Finally, we related how the students would, in contrast to the routine work of traditional school writing, be able to write creatively in response to a topic they could relate to. We furthermore explained how they would have ample time for brainstorming, drafting, and collaborative revision, a point that we believed would dispel the uneasiness we anticipated due to the fact that our students are primarily accustomed to essay writing within a brief and structured drafting, revising, and publishing period.

Level of Student Preparation

The freewriting sessions did much to prepare some students for the act of drafting a composed work; for others, however, they only provided topics or themes that students were able to expand on to create their individual creative pieces. During the drafting stage, many students still struggled with the concept of creating a unified work from their separate freewrite entries. With prompting to choose the topic they felt most applicable to their individual experiences, most students were able to compose a poem, essay, or other work around a single concept such as their favorite sport, the role technology plays in their lives, or their dreams for the future.

Student Results

The results of the extended freewriting sessions varied widely. We anticipated this outcome due to our understanding of the diverse ability levels of students within our classes, as well as their varied levels of interest in literature and creative writing. We believed that the personal yet general theme of The Mid-Teen Experience would allow all students to relate to the topic and be able to produce a reasonable amount of writing from which to later draw their individual works. Erica recalls the ini-

tial sessions as being generally painstaking, with much repeated explanation of the process and value of freewriting. Some students wrote quietly and diligently for the allotted time, while many others complained that they “didn’t know what to write” or were “finished with everything they had to say.”

Erica found that reminding students of Peter Elbow’s explanation in *Writing without Teachers* of the completely “free” aspect of these sessions as the opportunity to write about their personal experiences without the constraints of form or attainment of a grade on each entry to be helpful to many students (38). In addition, she found that suggesting that students treat the composition books almost as personal diaries helped even the most reluctant students to produce a reasonable amount of writing within the allotted time. She urged them, as Elbow suggests, to “[j]ust put down something” (37). As the sessions progressed, students became more and more capable of and interested in completing their weekly freewrites. The resulting body of work varied as widely as the interests of the students themselves. Many chose to write about their sports and extracurricular interests, anxiety over schoolwork and classes, and relationship issues. Several also identified a topic that seemed to become a common thread across the journals: aspirations for and concerns about life past the teen years.

The Writing Experience

The writing of the work was varied in both content and form. More students chose poems than Ryan expected, for example, and a few people even wrote and recorded songs for the assignment. The assignment provided us with a multifaceted view of the ways our students may and do see the world. These views were differentiated by sentence and story structure, word choice, and emphasis.

We didn’t see much of a difference in sentence structure and word choice. Students writing poetry often opted for deliberate fragments to fit whole thoughts onto lines, and opening modifying phrases predominated in student prose writing. The differences we did see were largely a matter of communicating vision: students did not show us new writing skills or stylistic displays for the most part, but rather committed greater energy to accurately depicting their thoughts, ideas, and beliefs.

One example of this is the opening to Frank’s short story, “The End.” A student known for writing just enough in other writing pieces, Frank revealed a strong ability to use description to bring life into his narration: “He woke up to the sound of his alarm clock going off two inches away from his head. It rang for a good seven minutes before he finally decided to punch it off.” Descriptions like this permeate his entire work, giving his writing an original voice that had been missing in his previous writing. Frank still struggled with word choice—he refers to first period as “pretty okay” later in the work—but the time he takes to communicate the early morning struggle to get up provides us with a deeper insight to his thoughts and ideas than we expected.

This increased communication may be the most dramatic impact of the creative pieces. Students do not fully understand the subtle nuances of poetry or how to carefully select words to reveal a specific character flaw, but they do know that they have something to say about their lives, and this project gave them the opportunity to do so. Although there are many things that students may not yet be able to do with language, this project showed us what they *can* do, and how they work around their linguistic shortcomings to reveal their thoughts and ideas.

In retrospect, we could have worked in scoring parameters that required students to write in new sentence structures, or we could have provided activities that required students to revise their word choice. However, this unit was geared toward widening student understanding of the connections between literature and creative writing while emphasizing how much they already know how to do. A lesson or unit can focus on any number of items, and we wanted to focus on freeing students to write with their own ends in mind and with

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their own voices on the page, whatever limitations that might cause.

That said, however, we did work with some students on expanding their voices in this work. Erica took numerous rough drafts in for revision

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when students asked for them, and Ryan worked with several poets to alter their poems in a variety of ways and decide whether they liked the change. All these instances of collaboration, however, were student-driven: we helped them accomplish what they were striving for when they

were ready for help, not when we decided they needed it. We wanted to put the student in the driver's seat and see where he or she took the car.

The Mid-Teen Experience unfolded in the exact manner that we had hoped for when we planned the unit earlier in the year. The students were engaged at a high level and modified language and literature as they needed to express themselves and their world. Their journey through self-expression of The Mid-Teen Experience, however, was not quite over yet. Because we had given students the opportunity to use language to accomplish their own purposes, we wanted to cap the unit by creating a literacy community with our two classes, and allow students to act as "knowledgeable, reflective" members of that community (NCTE and IRA 3). To accomplish those ends, we moved to the final stage of our unit: the anthology.

The Anthology Experience

Once the students had handed in their work, we began the difficult task of creating anthology packets. This was a labor-intensive task involving serious copier time, but it was completely worthwhile. Had the recent economic troubles not hindered our school's technology resources, we would have gladly undertaken the task online, using Google Docs or some other form of collaborative software. Soon each student had a copy of all of the work of his or her peers organized in a folder. Students were then required to organize the work into sections of like-minded pieces, and introduce each section with a two- to three-paragraph description of the

section, effectively acting as anthology editors. The students then wrote a preface to the work, and all of it had to be organized into a one-inch, three-ring binder and turned in.

The initial compilation stage of the student anthologies required students to peruse and take notes on the individual works to organize them into student-chosen sections. This stage of the unit was perhaps the most rewarding experience for us as teachers and the students. The students were highly engaged in reading and responding to each work and completed the task in a hushed and productive atmosphere that required little teacher intervention. Exploring their own written work and that of their classmates was more than sufficient motivation for them. The collaborative aspect of the anthology compilation required students to make inquiries to the authors of those works they had questions about. Their increased comfort level with members of both classes allowed them to conduct this stage with minimal prompting on our part.

Following the initial stage, students set to work composing a table of contents, anthology introduction, and section introductions for their individual anthologies. This stage continued to provide a highly engaging and challenging task for students as they analyzed and categorized the work of their peers. They became increasingly capable of seeking out authors they needed to question and completed the task of organizing and reorganizing their sections in a cooperative and industrious manner. It was refreshing to see all the students, even those normally inclined to procrastinate, actively completing the task.

A new challenge arose for many students when they arrived at the stage that required them to complete section introductions and reflect, through writing, on one work in that section that they found particularly powerful or effective. Many students had identified several works they were truly impressed with during the initial anthology organization stage, but the task of defining what a "powerful" or "effective" work was proved a difficult task for them. Students were forced to draw on their own understanding of the form and style of different creative works to critically reflect on the work of their peers. Some students did require prompting or assistance to put their feelings about why the work was effective into their own words.

However, the constant that remained was that all students did have a particular work they felt compelled to respond to, whether for stylistic or personal reasons.

The anthology experience created a sense of community in our combined classes. The students were together for a specific purpose, and they worked with each other to complete that purpose independently. While the writing experience gave students the chance to express themselves, the anthology experience gave them the opportunity to see the personal expression of others and organize those expressions according to their personal preferences. This social interaction added depth and importance to the work of our students and increased their focus throughout the anthology sessions.

Writing for Today

In “The Dream Deferred: How ‘College and Career Readiness’ Looks from Below,” Eastern Michigan University’s Bill Tucker notes that “Students should know the value of reading and writing in the present, so they are not forever prodded by deferred goals such as admission to the college of their choice” (115). Tucker’s point shares remarkable similarities with our goals during this unit. We wanted our students to work with critical-thinking skills and effective writing techniques, but we wanted to let them do it on their terms. Though it is true that each of our students has a future to work toward, it is also true that each student is situated in a real and important present, and this unit gave them all a chance to explore themselves and their

worlds of today using the skills and knowledge that they will need tomorrow.

Beginning with Kirby, Kirby, and Liner’s beliefs about writing and building outward to engage students in meaningful writing, collaboration, and critical thinking helped both of us—Ryan and Erica—include a meaningful creative writing assignment for our students that fit smoothly within the context and goals of our curriculum. The students in the class learned how closely related the reader is to the writer, and they experimented with moving back and forth in creative writing and anthology editing. Students were able to use language for their own

purposes and create their own literacy community within which their language skills could thrive. The creative writing was meaningful and difficult at the same time, challenging students to use their skills and reveal their understanding of the world in a meaningful, safe, and inventive manner. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

“Creative Writing in the Natural World: A Framing” shares a fun, creative writing activity that encourages student writing. In this minilesson, students practice writing detailed, sensory-rich descriptions by framing a small piece of nature and freewriting about it. From this, students can develop a variety of types of writing including poetry, short stories, science writing, reflections, and other academic genres. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/creative-writing-natural-world-30607.html>