

Preliminary Report of WID English Department Creativity Project

“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”

-Antoine De Saint Exupery

What is this project?

When we submitted a proposal for this WID project it was called “Exploring Alternative Genres in Writing About Literature.” The purpose was to talk about different kinds of assignments, in addition to the literary essay, that could inspire a deeper level of engagement and thought from our students. To get them to care about what they’re writing. The idea was that if students care about what they’re writing, if they feel invested, if they feel engaged, then a lot of the issues that frustrate us as teachers (sloppy writing, unoriginal thought, plagiarism, etc.) can be replaced by content that is genuinely meaningful and profound.

As soon as we started researching alternative genres, it became clear that this project was about much more than what we originally intended. One concept came up in everything that we read and everyone that we talked to: creativity. Much contemporary pedagogical theory makes the case that creativity belongs right next to critical thinking as the highest order of cognitive skills that we should be emphasizing in our classrooms (Sullivan, “Essential” 548-49). Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy in fact identifies creating as the apex of learning objectives (Anderson and Krathwohl).

So, this project’s focus went from thinking about alternative genres to thinking more broadly about how creativity can be emphasized more in our English classes at Dawson.

What do you mean by creativity?

While we are interested in exploring genres typically thought of as “creative writing” (short stories, poems, etc.), creativity is by no means limited to that. In fact, short stories and poems are really a small part of what we’re talking about here. It’s useful at this stage to define creativity as simply as possible, so we’ll use a couple of definitions that came up in our research:

- “Creativity is defined as coming up with original ideas that have value” (Sahlberg 143).
- “Putting elements together to form a novel, coherent whole or to make an original product” (Anderson and Krathwohl 30).

Working from these definitions, it’s easy to see how everything we are asking our students to do is creative. Reading works of literature is a creative act. We’re asking students to create writing. We’re asking them to create discussion, create thought, create questions, create answers, create interpretations, create analysis, create a community of thinkers, etc.

But, we often ask them to create without helping them understand how creativity works. We're assigning them tasks and work, but we don't teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea. So, more questions come up:

- How do we teach our students how to be creative? How do we design assignments in a way that actually fosters creativity?

This is what we're trying to shed some light on. We don't profess to have all the answers to this. But, we have some ideas. And, judging by the meetings we've had with some members of our department, you have many ideas. Here's a quick summary of some of the attitudes the faculty members we've spoken to have identified as important when it comes to thinking in a creative way:

- Paying attention to attitudes and feelings toward the work produced.
- Being excited by the process of discovery.
- Focusing on process, rather than final product.
- Being comfortable dwelling in the unknown.
- Being willing to take risks, to be wrong (Sullivan, "The Unessay" 14).
- Moving beyond the most obvious thought to reach deeper truths.
- Making expression a personal and meaningful act.

The goal of emphasizing the above criteria in the classroom is to help students attain more versatile creative skills that will serve them in multiple dimensions of their lives inside and outside the classroom (Sullivan, "The Unessay" 12). We're a very big department with many creative people. What we want to do is explore more deeply the value we place on creativity in the classroom, and how to emphasize it more.

What has been the process of this project so far?

We started by reading a selection of articles discussing different aspects of creativity in the classroom. We met regularly to discuss these readings and brainstorm ideas that the literature inspired in us. We conducted a survey about department members' use of creativity in their classes. We analyzed this data in order to develop a set of priorities of areas to work on. We met individually with several teachers and discussed their use of creativity and creative genres in their classrooms. We've started planning the output for this project.

What will the output be?

We are developing a website that will detail the findings from our project, as well as serve as a hub of online discussion about creativity in our classrooms. The website will have links to the articles we've read, as well as templates and ideas for designing assignments and grading rubrics. There will also be a database of teacher assignments that have proven successful. Faculty will be invited to write guest posts about how creativity is a part of their curriculum.

The website will also serve as a complementary resource to two workshops we will be holding in the Fall 2016 semester. The workshops will serve as a ground zero for our department-wide discussion of where creativity fits into our curriculum. These will be hands-on workshops where

participants will have the opportunity to design new assignments, or further refine ones they already have.

What about the survey Jeff and Susan sent around?

The survey was very enlightening. The results from the survey will appear anonymously in condensed form on the website. But, in short, there was a definite pattern to the responses which can be summed up with the following excerpts:

Positives:

- “Student engagement can be greater in projects or assignments that allow for a greater degree of creativity. The more engaged the learner, the more the concepts sink in.”
- “More enthusiasm, creativity, and happiness! Students feel challenged in a way that does not crush their souls.”
- “I notice their writing improves greatly in terms of structure and grammar when they write outside of the literary essay genre.”
- “Students seem much more invested in expressing themselves and their ideas about a literary text.”

Challenges:

- “Grading them can be tricky as the criteria for ‘creative’ are difficult to define.”
- “I worry that there is no fair way to mark someone's personal work.”
- “Designing objective criteria for assessing the work.”
- “Concerns would be about losing the analytical component.”
- “The standard analytical essay requires organization, clarity and concision of expression, and close reading. I'm not sure alternative genres make the same demands.”
- “I have been challenged in trying to communicate that 'personal' does not mean careless or sloppy.”

Analyzing the data from the survey helped us formulate a set of categories to focus on for the website and the workshops:

- 1) Why should we stress creativity and use creative genres in the classroom?
- 2) How can we effectively design assignments that engage students creatively and fulfil the analytical requirements of our classes?
- 3) How can we develop fair and rigorous grading criteria for creative assignments?

What do you mean by creative genres?

As stated above, things like short stories and poems are genres that we can consider using more in our classes. But, the interpretation of “creative genres” can go way beyond that. One thing worth considering are real-world genres, meaning genres that imply a specific audience and purpose. Brain research indicates that “different kinds of writing tasks stimulate different parts of the brain” (Bean 63). Attaching a “real world” audience and purpose to student writing can go a

long way toward motivating students to care about their work. In this way, we're not only thinking about creative genres, but about creative approaches to the use of genres in the writing classroom.

But, we are also interested in talking about creative approaches to literary essays. This type of writing can be as creative as any other type. Can we design our literary essays in a way that fosters more creativity?

In "The Life of Genre, the Life in the Classroom," Charles Bazerman presents a very illuminating perspective: "Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning... Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar" (19). Students read and write in many different genres inside and outside of school every day. They come into our classrooms with a fundamental understanding of what genre is. Let's build from what they already know.

Many in our department feel restricted to a single, strictly defined genre in our courses. Oral tradition tells us that it is department policy to assign three essays – or the equivalent. We haven't defined "the equivalent" – and many of us like it that way, because that openness gives us the freedom to explore alternative genres and more creative alternatives to those three essays. We think it's important to discuss this policy and how it is interpreted by different members of our department. It is also important to note that the 101 competency is not only to analyze but to "*produce various forms of discourse*" (emphasis added).

So, are we just trying to dumb things down to make students happier?

We're looking at ways to get work from our students that is more thoughtful, profound, original, and better written. We're trying to inspire them to create work that is more intellectually substantial, not less. Our goals are very similar to ones that Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick express in *Habits of Mind*: "We are interested in enhancing the ways students *produce* knowledge rather than how they merely *reproduce* it" (16). Christian Knoeller has found that "writing imaginatively in response to literary works" requires close and focused rereading and analysis, leading to interpretations that "are often considerably more thoughtful and complex" (43). Our classes are literature classes based on the analysis of short stories, poems, novels, essays, etc. No one's trying to change that. We're trying to get better at what we already do, not do something totally different.

Many teachers in this department have expressed a frustration with the limitations of the literary essay. Yet, we still assign it, time after time. This raised a couple of questions for us:

- Do students need to suffer in order to grow as thinkers?
- Is there not more potential for intellectual rigour when students are excited, engaged, and passionate?

We're looking forward to discussing all these ideas on a deeper and more practical level, starting in Fall 2016. Stay tuned.

Works Cited

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