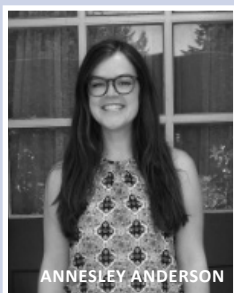


Tutors' Column: "Helping Students See Themselves as Writers: Creative Writing Exercises in the Writing Center"

Annesley Anderson
Boston College



ANNESLEY ANDERSON

How can writing tutors help students, in the brief time that we have, gain the confidence to see themselves as writers and engage with the texts they read and create? Charles Moran, as well as Melissa Bugdal and Ricky Holtz, propose one reason students might lack confidence or control over their writing: the highly structured processes of writing and thinking internalized throughout their academic life can damage students' ability to write creatively and to their full ability. In my experience, many students who come to the writing center feel limited by a rigid understanding of the writing process, lack a sense of control or agency, and/or just feel stuck. So, inspired by Moran and Bugdal and Holtz to find a fresh response to this problem, I have developed some exercises that use creative writing as a tool to disrupt students' preconceived ideas about the writing process and to boost writerly agency.

For many, academic writing and creative writing seem like separate spheres in my opinion, to the detriment of writing center pedagogy. Like academic writing, writing centers may tend toward formal language, the rules of paragraph organization, the need to follow certain steps, etc. Though the writing process is acknowledged to be messy, there remains the desire for an end result that looks neat and follows prescriptions. This focus on rules and guidelines is obviously necessary, and for some students, works well. But there is also room—and for the types of students just mentioned, I believe, a need—for a looser, more playful approach.

In "Teaching Writing/Teaching Literature," Charles Moran, a literature professor, demonstrates what a more playful approach might look like. He "asked students to be writers" once a week, giving the class a creative prompt mimicking the style of a writer they were about to read (23). These prompts gave the students a new arena in which to practice their skills—an arena not already partitioned off with rules internalized throughout their education—and consequently the students became better readers,

analysts, and writers. He and the students loved it. It helped the class better understand the writer's audience and context, and most importantly, it allowed them to see themselves as writers and thinkers, alongside the literary giants they studied. Moran claims the exercises enriched his students' academic writing "by altering the perceived context of the student prose.... and by liberating the student writers" from previous instruction (27, 28).

Much like Moran, Bugdal and Holtz's Writing Fellows noticed that many first-year writing students lacked "agency and full control" over their thinking. Because the students were not engaging confidently with texts, the Fellows found that students could write neither effectively nor interestingly. The Fellows tackled this problem by presenting complex philosophical thought experiments¹ for discussion, seemingly unrelated to the course—allowing them to think outside the context of grades and correct answers. Then, during discussion, the Fellows "pivoted": they asked students to apply the thought experiments to the positions held in their own work. Because of these thought experiments, Bugdal and Holtz explain, "students had a theoretical point of reference over which they had control," and therefore, "a willingness to take risks in their writing." Their pedagogy, like Moran's, attempts to free students from the constraints of formal thinking and writing and to give them confidence to enter the conversation.

Exploring these successes led me to wonder: How might we, in the writing center, offer writers the types of opportunities presented by Moran and Bugdal and Holtz? It seems a daunting question, as tutors will never have the same kind of time or extended contact that professors or Fellows do, but I believe a reworking of similar principles for use in a tutoring session is not only possible but would prove a lively addition to pedagogy.

I propose—based on my own experiments with this strategy—that tutors start small, providing concise, creative exercises relevant to the writer's assignment and answerable within the span of a single tutoring session. For writers who feel that they do not qualify as real writers because of the strict guidelines of academic writing, these creative exercises allow a different, less overwhelming space to write and develop a sense of agency.

What do these exercises look like? Mine vary based on assignment, stage of the writing process, and style and form, but they often look something like this:

Student: I'm having trouble starting this paper.

Exercise: Write a brief, one paragraph journal entry about the topic or a short letter to a friend.

Student: I'm struggling to cohere my ideas.

Exercise: Write your thesis as a tweet (140 characters).

Student: I need ideas for a literature paper.

Exercise: Write a paragraph from the character's perspective, or a short conversation between characters (realistic or silly).

Student: I need to begin a research paper.

Exercise: Write a brief email to an old teacher or a blog post, explaining your current views on and questions about the topic.

These exercises are suggestions, not prescriptions, because the approach will surely vary based on the student and the challenges of the particular assignment. However, when designing the exercises, I keep a few things in mind. They have to be accomplishable within a tutoring session—which is why mine never ask for more than a paragraph. The form should be something the students recognize and feel comfortable with; the less rigid, the better. The writer's audience shifts to someone unthreatening, like a friend or a family member. And finally, it should require a little creativity.

I try to gauge at the beginning of the conference whether the student would benefit from the exercise: do they seem to be preoccupied with the rules of academic writing, possibly lacking a sense of control or agency or feeling stuck? And because this activity does take a substantial chunk of time, I also need to determine if I have enough time to engage in this activity with a writer. If the conditions are favorable, I usually find it worthwhile to spend time on this activity, even at the expense of other writing because it so often helps them start writing more freely.

Not all conferences will be appropriate for the exercise. Students are often in a hurry, have a specific question, or only want a brief edit. Some might resent being given what they see as another "assignment." Ideally the exercises are short, simple, and enjoyable enough to avoid this last response, but it does happen. Because a student may resist engaging in a creative writing exercise, I find it crucial to talk with the student first and fully explain: "What would you think of taking this out of the academic world for now? I've found it helps students to write creatively about a topic." If they show reluctance, I move on to something else. But if they like the idea, I come up with an exercise for them, make sure they like it, and step away to give them space to write. Once they have something, I return and we discuss. Hopefully the activity helped to surface some new ideas or bring some old ones together. Like Bugdal and Holtz suggest, it is necessary to reconnect these thoughts to the

original assignment. Did this type of writing feel different? In what ways? What ideas have you drawn up here that seem relevant to your assignment? Such questions can help students move between the creative process and the academic writing at hand.

Moran claims his creative prompts helped his students “throw off destructive inhibitions. It created in them a sense of themselves as writers, and allowed them to write the expository prose of which they were capable” (29). The composing done in centers can have a natural tendency to reinforce overly structured processes of academic writing by focusing (necessarily) on the rules (though the intimidating blank page of the ‘free write’ may err in the opposite direction). But the writing center should also be a space to experiment, to play. And I believe that recovering the kinship between creative and expository writing has the potential not only to liven up writing centers, but also to breathe some fresh air into academic writing as a whole.

NOTES

1. Bugdal and Holtz describe thought experiments as “a sort of mental sandbox” that enabled writers to think about an abstract problem that lacks a clear solution but could be productively applied to students’ writing.



WORKS CITED

Bugdall, Melissa, and Ricky Holtz. “When Writing Fellows Become Reading Fellows: Creative Strategies for Critical Reading and Writing in a Course-Based Tutoring Program.” *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014. www.praxisuwc.com/bugdal-holtz-121.

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