Creativity is Not a Luxury: Students (Re)Writing American Literature

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"[P]oetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (37)

-- Audre Lorde

Abstract: This article enters a half-century-old debate surrounding the usefulness of creative writing assignments in college literature courses. Following a brief literature review, this article provides a case study of an ENG 131: Introduction to Literature survey course taught at a North Carolina community college. This case study provides context and then moves to scaffolding exercises, the assignment itself, and performance criteria (rubric). Then, quantitative and qualitative data derived from student surveys illustrates the benefits of the creative project, further complemented by samples of student products, appearing here with student consent. According to Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider*, "poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence." (37). If poetry is a symbol of creativity, then creativity is not a luxury, but the very "skeleton architecture of our lives"--the foundation that keeps us upright and moving forward. Therefore, students have a right to access and use their creativity to solve problems and illustrate depth of comprehension. Add to this fundamental human right the effectiveness of creative projects in the classroom and we have more than a finding: we have a call to action. In essence, this article illustrates that creative writing assignments in the literature classroom can help engage students while deepening their understanding of course material and strengthening transferable skills.

Introduction

Admirers of Audre Lorde likely will notice three words missing from the beginning of the famous phrase above: "For women, then" (37). The omission reveals the universal applicability of her argument while also allowing it to speak for everyone who has been overshadowed, written off, oppressed, and marginalized. This group--made up of various races, classes, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, and ages--represents many community college student populations, and the composition of the Introduction to Literature class represented in this article is no exception. In Lorde's vision above, poetry is a basic need, not a delicacy reserved for certain groups. Neither is it "only dream or vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives" (Lorde 38). Therefore, poems are not intangible, ephemeral things, but "the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real
According to Lorde, poetry provides the framework within which our "our hopes and dreams toward survival and change" take shape. She further explains that "it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless-about to be birthed, but already felt" (36).

It is these "hopes and dreams" that so many hard-working students pack into their bags every morning as they prepare for another day of classes, lectures, reading, writing, and homework. It is this goal of "survival and change" that keeps so many students pushing through their classes, despite considerable odds. And it is the same "hopes and dreams toward survival and change" for which their educators plan, prepare, lecture, grade, and advise. If poetry serves, as Lorde suggests, as a symbol of creativity, then creativity is not a luxury, but the very "skeleton architecture of our lives"--the foundation that keeps us upright and moving forward. Therefore, students have a right to access and use their creativity to solve problems and illustrate depth of comprehension. Add to this fundamental human right the effectiveness of creative projects in the classroom and we have more than a finding: we have a call to action.

Methodology

This article enters a half-century-old debate surrounding the usefulness of creative writing assignments in college literature courses. Following a brief literature review, this article provides a case study of an ENG 131: Introduction to Literature survey course taught at a North Carolina community college. This case study provides context and then moves to scaffolding exercises, the assignment itself, and performance criteria (rubric). Then, quantitative and qualitative data derived from student surveys illustrates the benefits of the creative project, further complemented by samples of student products, appearing here with student consent. In essence, this article illustrates that creative writing assignments in the literature classroom can help engage students while deepening their understanding of course material and strengthening transferable skills.

The quantitative data collected reflected an overwhelmingly positive response to the creative assignment. The qualitative data provides insights into student expectations of
college-level education and its limitations. Moreover, the students' commentary underscores what they perceive as missing from their education--creativity--and the relief, pleasure, and freedom its reintroduction brings to their educational experience. Perhaps most importantly, we hear in these responses a collective voice that challenges us to test institutional and personal boundaries that may, in turn, unlock the freedom that students seek.

**Literature Review**

In his introduction to *Teaching Writing Creatively*, which endeavors to break down the dichotomy of "academic" and "creative," David Starkey employs an agricultural metaphor to argue for a "polyculture," or cross-pollination, of often-separated writing areas, namely creative writing and composition. Criticism regarding the relationship between composition and creative writing has flourished over the past two decades thanks to scholars like Doug Hesse, Wendy Bishop, and Patrick Bizarro, yet scholarship focused on the use of creative writing as a pedagogical tool in literature courses remains relatively sparse.

In her often-cited article, "The Value of Creative Writing Assignments in English Literature Courses," Veronica Austen hits notes similar to Starkey when she asserts that separation of formal essays and creative writing is a false one and that "in addition to provoking our students to become closer readers, creative writing assignments serve to further students' understanding of literary criticism" (142). Similarly, in "Crossing the Boundaries of a Discipline: A Postcolonial Approach to Teaching Creative Writing in the University," Marcelle Freiman observes that the use of creative writing assignments builds applicable and useful skills in that "[c]reative writing involves re-reading and rewriting which develops critical ability in an acutely practical, and experiential, context. Developing this critical-reading faculty is a vital part of the teaching of writing" (par. 19). Along the same vein, in her book *Composition Studies as a Creative Art: Teaching, Writing, Scholarship, Administration*, Lynn Z. Bloom argues that "To be a producer as well as a consumer of texts enables—no, obliges—the writer to understand works of literature from the inside out" (57). This desire for students to understand content "from the inside out" echoes throughout
disciplines. Most professors can agree that critical reading and thought are fundamental to academic success.

In an age of ever-increasing emphasis on Student Learning Outcomes and accrediting-centered accountability, these authors raise another important issue related to assigning a creative paper: assessment. As Freiman points out, "The perceived unstructured nature of creative writing, its potential for chaos and irrationality—discourses outside the familiar structures and expectations of the English discipline—are seen as a cause for concern, together with the perception that students would bring their own experiences into the classroom" (par. 1). This anxiety is then compounded by "the question of the assessment of creativity, which appears unmeasurable and unquantifiable by academic assessment standards" (Freiman par. 1). To meet this challenge and to maintain an analytical focus within her creative assignment, Austen requires students to reflect upon their process of completing the assignment in the form of a "critical assessment". She notes that "Some people may critique such an approach that does not allow the creative writing to stand alone and show its own value," yet she reinforces the value of such an exercise: "requiring such an analytic response, beyond testing a student's ability to construct an effective paragraph or essay, ensures that the activity of creative writing has in fact accomplished its purpose of deepening one's engagement with the course material" (147). Amy Cummins, in "Tell Me a Story: Effective Use of Creative Writing Assignments in College Literature Courses," echoes the value of this reflective element of the assignment with regard to the "Writer's Statement": "Essential to the value of a creative writing assignment, the concise writer's statement appears at the beginning of the submission, making the paper both critical and creative. This self-analysis sets up the goals of the individual and shows critical engagement with the writing process" (3). She observes that the ultimate value of this exercise is that "It demonstrates self-reflection and makes writers articulate the methods and purposes of their work, contributing also to students' greater appreciation of writing as a craft" (44). Similarly, Austen posits that creative writing provides students the fortitude "to claim an active role in the classroom" because it strips away the potentially alienating "awe of literature" (140). These scholars show that critical and creative acts do not have to be mutually exclusive; the two actions can complement and even
reinforce one another. Moreover, reconciling the critical and creative can empower students and help them become active participants in their education.

This "deepening" of "engagement with the course material" reflects the pedagogical goal for the creative assignment, as does the belief that self-analysis, in the form of a critical response or reflection, is a particularly effective tool to assess how, why and to what depth students engaged with, understood, and applied course material.

Case Study: ENG 131 Introduction to Literature

Course Context

The course in question here is ENG 131: Introduction to Literature, a course that is taught at all community colleges in North Carolina and that (under the 2014 North Carolina Comprehensive Articulation Agreement) can partially fulfill the General Education Humanities/ Fine Arts requirement for an Associate in Arts degree. Alongside the Associate in Science degree, this is the program most frequently chosen by students who wish to transfer to a 4-year college or university. As a result, this is a popular and frequently offered course that is available in traditional face-to-face format as well as fully online.

Teachers across the country are acutely aware of Student Learning Outcomes and methods by which outcomes can be assessed; therefore, it is worthwhile to comment on the how well the creative assignment can meet common SLOs. At the time that this course took place, ENG 131 had 7 outcomes and the multiple components of the creative project met three of those: SLO #1: Apply literary terminology to selected literary genres orally and/or in writing; SLO #5: Apply the principles of literary analysis to individual works studied orally and/or in writing; and SLO #: (Demonstrate adult literacy expectations orally and in writing. The catalog description for this course, which we are required to present on our syllabus, reads as such: "This course introduces the principle genres of literature. Emphasis is placed on literary terminology, devices, structure, and interpretation. Upon completion, students should be able to analyze and respond to literature."

This description does not seem to focus on American literature; that aspect of the course is revealed in the standard readings (everyone who teaches the course must use the same books). The books required for the course are a departmentally developed reader,
Doubt, Fences, and Maus. Teachers may bring in additional texts--films, poems, short stories, novels--as well, but these are the required readings that all students who take the course are expected to complete. The stories anthologized in A Critical Introduction to Short Fiction, edited and compiled by our department chair and an adjoining committee, feature work from classic American authors like Tim O'Brien, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Alice Walker, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Flannery O'Connor, and many others. The intention of this American focus is (likely) to prepare the many students who will proceed to ENG 231/232: the American literature course series, which can be used to fulfill requirements for the Associate in Arts degree. The regional student body responds well to the American themed content, which then allows for the exploration of diverse viewpoints, cultures, and values. Moreover, this literary content often dovetails nicely with students' American history courses, which gives them an opportunity to transfer knowledge amongst classes and to participate meaningfully in class discussion. To make course instruction easier for adjunct and late-hire faculty, the textbook pairs a brief description of each literary device with two literary examples that utilize that device. So, for example, 'Structure' would be paired with "The Things They Carried," while 'Setting and Atmosphere' would be paired with Tobias Wolff's "Hunters in the Snow," and so on. The structure of the textbook also allows students to build their knowledge by asking students to connect devices to works read in previous chapters, which enabled a sense of continuity throughout the semester.

The Assignment

The creative project was an intentional end-of-semester assignment designed to assess the extent to which students understood and internalized literary devices--such as point of view, setting, characterization, structure, etc.--that had been the primary focus of course content. Scaffolded work that asked students to identify and critique the use of literary devices within assigned readings was incorporated throughout the semester via Moodle homework assignments, forums, and class discussions. However, no formal scaffolding exercises were incorporated between the delivery of the assignment and the required presentation of the assignment. This was in part necessary, but also purposeful. The assignment was given before the last week of classes when no other homework was due; considering what their content and genre might be was their homework that weekend.
As such, students came to class prepared to discuss the requirements of the assignment, brainstorm and discuss ideas with myself and other students, and outline a trajectory for the assignment. An interesting phenomenon that developed during this discussion was an inclination toward secrecy; students openly stated that they did not want other students to "steal" their ideas. Many also wanted to "premire" their work at the final exam period, rather than "give it away" during the discussion. As a result, what was intended as a full-class discussion turned into a number of small breakout groups with students chatting about the assignment amongst themselves and semi-private mini conferences with the professor. In this way, the lack of scaffolding was useful. The lack of scaffolding at the end was also rooted in the desire to keep students' work as authentic to their own voices and views as possible. They deserved a chance to shine on their own, without professor intervention, and they did not disappoint.

The creative writing assignment was the final requirement of the class, worth 15% of the overall course grade, 5% of which counted as an oral presentation grade. Students "performed" their pieces during a faux coffeehouse "open mic" session during the final exam period, complete with fresh-brewed coffee and tea. Linking the assignment to the final exam period likely helped some students take the assignment seriously and make a special effort when planning and crafting their piece. Students also knew that they would be evaluated based upon a rubric (like all the major assignments of the class), as stated on the assignment sheet: "Students will be graded via rubric on the effective use of point of view, setting, atmosphere, narrative structure, depth of characterization, attention to style, theme, and one special device (including: irony, foreshadowing, flashback, imagery, motif, symbol or archetype)."

At the top of the assignment sheet, students were given these directions: "In this creative alternative to a final paper, students will identify one or more works covered in the course and choose one of the options below." They also were given specific expectations regarding length and quality of the assignment: "All papers should be 2-3 pages (500 - 800 words) in length; double-spaced; Sentences should be clearly written with proper grammar, usage and mechanics (where applicable). If student chooses poetry option, student may write more than one poem and/or adapt more than one story to poetry." Finally, they were provided with a "rhetorical context" for the assignment: "Modeled on an 'open mic night,'
students will present their creative projects to their classmates (during the final exam period) over refreshments."

The options provided the students included perspective flip," "genre swap," "two worlds collide," "what if?," "next chapter," or the "director's proposal." For the "perspective flip," students could "mimic the style or form of any work we have read in class; the twist: tell a piece of the story from another character's perspective. (Example, if you choose *Maus*, you would create a few scenes from the graphic novel, telling another character's story)."

For the "genre swap," students could "change the genre of the work: adapt a story into a poem; adapt a poem into a story; adapt a play into a poem; adapt a story to a graphic novel - the possibilities are endless. Include a brief explanation of why you chose the work and why you adapted it the way that you did. For "two worlds collide," students could opt to write a short story of what would happen if any characters from any two works met. If they chose to adopt the "what if?" prompt, students would explore "what would have happened if some element of a story had been different? Another option: what if the time / setting of the story were different? (Example: What would happen if Ms. Emily were a teenager today? What if Annabelle Lee had not died?) The students also could choose to write the "next chapter" in which they could "write a short story that explores what happened after the story ended."

Finally, students could write the "director's proposal," which involved "writ[ing] a proposal for a music video, movie, etc. adaptation of one of the works read in class with attention to literary devices noted above." The final option--the "Director's Proposal"--was provided for students feeling less creatively inclined (or those that bore too much anxiety related to creativity, which is common) to write a proposal for a creative project with attention to the noted devices. Only two students chose this option, while many others opted to merge options; for example, through pairing a "genre swap" with a "perspective shift."

To underscore the importance of certain aspects of the assignment, students also were provided a "checklist" with which they might double-check their piece as it related to the requirements of the assignment. As such, students were asked the following: "Did I remember to: __ Follow basics of assignment? __ Use 500-800 words? __ Foster depth of character? __ Make point of view clear? __ Make setting clear? __ Create atmosphere? __ Attend to narrative structure? __ Consider theme? __ Attend to style/special device?" It is
unknown the extent to which students used this checklist, though that would be a useful question to include in future student surveys.

The performance criteria listed on the grading rubric hosted in Moodle directly correlated to the second and third bullets of the assignment sheet. The rubric criteria included literary devices used, length, format, and standard adult literacy. Therefore, the criteria to be evaluated was listed on the rubric:

- Use of Point of View;
- Use of Setting;
- Use of Atmosphere;
- Clarity of Narrative Structure;
- Depth of Characterization;
- Attention to/ sense of Style;
- Traceable or Deducible Theme (or message / argument / moral of your the story); Presence of One (1) Special Device: Irony, Foreshadowing, Flashback, Imagery, Motif, Symbol or Archetype; Length; Grammar / Usage Mechanics.

The categories used to evaluated student performance of the criteria were simple: Excellent (4), Well Done (3), Good Start (2), Emerging (1) and Not Submitted (0). We had used a similar value system throughout our assignments, so students had a general familiarity with and understanding of these categories. Excellent was the equivalent of an "A" paper or "Exceeds Expectations/Distinguished" on a rubric: all requirements were met and performance was rich and innovative; writing was clear, effective, and appropriate to college level; only a few small errors were apparent. Well Done was the equivalent of a "B" paper or "Meets Expectations" on a rubric: all requirements were met; writing was clear and appropriate to college level; and a number of small errors may be present. Good Start was equivalent to a "C" paper or "Needs Improvement/Marginal" on a rubric, while Emerging was equivalent to an "Inadequate/Unacceptable" rubric designation. The final two values indicated that requirements were not met and/or writing was illegible or exhibited errors that
hindered communication. No grade complaints or inquiries were fielded after the
assignment was graded.

Of the 21 grades assigned, one student failed the assignment (for not following
directions by submitting a summary of a play); one student received a Good Start / C, 4
students received Well Done / Bs, and the remaining 15 received a grade within the
spectrum of an Excellent / A (90-100). Grade distribution like this might normally raise red
flags of concern, but the quality of the student work merited the positive markings. It should
be noted that this class's performance was particularly strong all semester, so the quality of
the work was not limited to the creative project. It is possible that the overall strength of the
class led to the high quality of the creative projects submitted.

**Student Samples**

Of the literary works chosen to be "revised" by students, Wolff's "Hunters in the
Snow" garnered the most attention at six student adaptations. O'Connor's "Good Country
People" and August Wilson's *Fences* led to three student pieces each. Kate Chopin's "The
Story of an Hour" and Patrick Shanley's *Doubt* resulted in two student projects each. The
remaining students worked individually with O'Brien's "The Things They Carried," Gilman's
Tale*, Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.,” and the poem "No Goodbyes" from Paul
Monette's collection *Love Alone* (included as an additional reading).

The most surprising and impressive results of this assignment are evident in actual
examples of students' work, for this is where their unique brilliance and vision shine
through. In their adaptations of "Hunters in the Snow," "Good Country People," *Doubt*,
*Fences*, *Maus*, and "A Rose for Emily," the students switch settings, deepen character arcs,
offer character reflection, highlight mother-daughter and father-son bonds, and give voice to
characters that previously had none.

The revisions of "Hunters in the Snow" fall into two categories: some students
focused on the environment (or setting, in the course's terminology) to influence the unique
outcome of their story, while others focused on character arc and development. Sungwoo,
for example, weaves Wolff's frosty environment into cold intentions in his revision of the
story. After Kenny has been shot by Tub, Sungwoo writes, "Tub went back to his seat,
slightly smiling. Kenny saw Tub's white teeth when he was smiling. He thought that Tub's teeth were so white that it looked just like the falling snow. But he also thought that his teeth were not as pure as the snow. The snow began to fall harder and harder. Frank explains to Kenny, "Tub shot you intentionally. He deiced [sic] to kill you since we made a plan to go hunting…you should have treated him better….this is all I can tell you. Sorry buddy." Rather than remaining a passive victim, Sungwoo ends the story with Kenny taking action: "[He] didn't do anything but tried to look calm, taking his gun out and loading it slowly and silently." Similarly, Sean uses the wintry setting to add a shocking turn of events to the end of the story, and one that removes any doubt as to Kenny's demise. In Sean's version of the story, Frank and Tub realize they have taken the wrong road and try to turn around, but the truck slides on ice: "The truck plum[m]eted nearly five feet before slamming into the ground, jolting Frank and Tub back in their seats." Upon realizing Kenny has vanished from the back of the truck, the two men search for him. Sean writes,

Tub, not being able to utter a single word, pointed to the back wheel of the truck, under which Kenny's unmoving body lay. In the crash, the back gate of the truck had come undone and Kenny had slid off the back of the truck. He had gone into the ditch first, and the truck had fallen on him. The truck had done everything but tear him in half. Kenny was as flat as a pancake from his hips to the bottom of his ribs. He had already started to turn purple from the cold.

In Sean's retelling of the story, nature kills Kenny, thereby shifting some of the guilt off of the other characters.

In contrast, Sierra radically changed the setting in "Hunters in the Snow" from the frigid snowy north to intense heat of the south. In her reimagining of the plot, the heat causes Kenny's hands to sweat and results in his shooting Tub, rather than the opposite. In beautiful prose, Sierra writes: "The air was thick with humidity and the boiling hot sun was above, making the tree shadows the only way to get out of the beating sun. Two out of the three men were in awe of the way Kenny heartlessly shot that dog. Flies were already starting to gather around the dog, as if they were curious to why it stopped moving." Her
imagery crescendos in almost Tarantino-like style when the focus turns to Tub's wound: "The blood from his wound was slowing [sic] overwhelming the hand he was trying to plug it up with. With the sun high in the air, the blood did not seem to fit in with the bright green grass underneath it." Much like the snow becomes a character in Wolff's story, the sun becomes a character here: it boils, it beats, it hangs high above the men; shadows are the only escape from its power.

The remaining student adaptations focus on character arcs and development. For example, Akshar distilled Wolff's story into a poem that exhibits simplicity of language and restraint. He also built into the poem a reader response to the story, which almost "breaks the fourth wall," to borrow a theatre term, and reveals the audience's role in the creation of a story's meaning. Akshar uses humor toward the beginning of the poem when he writes, "Kenny makes fun of Tub and treats him like a piece of shrub/ Frank has the heart for a fifteen-year-old girl/ His denial for lust makes you want to hurl/ Kenny is most cruel." Yet, much like the tone in the story itself, that humor and playfulness vanish as Akshar's revision progresses to Kenny's point of view: "Making fun of Tub is what he enjoys/ Having no care for what he does/ Driving recklessly thinking nothing but to destroy/ He does it just simply because." It is telling that Kenny's cruelty caps off one stanza and earns an entire stanza; many of the students in the class admitted deep conflict over cheering for Kenny's imminent death and the other characters "doing the right thing," or saving Kenny. The reason behind the students' ambivalence is likely evident in how Kenny's cruelty is presented here, as a dehumanized destructive, "reckless" vehicle that could harm anyone at any time. And what's more disturbing is that this destructive force has no reason driving it; Kenny destroys things "just simply because."

Two students used their revision to deepen the development of the other characters in the story: Frank and Tub. In her revision, Caroline rewrites the ending of the story as Frank and Tub find a house, take Kenny inside, and call an ambulance. Due to the weather, it takes a long time for the ambulance to arrive, but arrive it does and it transports Kenny to the hospital. However, Kenny dies and the story ends with an emphasis on this tragedy enabling a bond between Frank and Tub: "In the end Frank didn't leave his wife for the babysitter and Tub stopped overeating. Frank and Tub are close friends now and go hunting every weekend during deer season in remembrance of their friend Kenny."
Caroline’s revision, the tragedy enabled a character arc in that the two men were able to overcome their personal struggles as a result of the tragedy. In a slightly darker yet intriguing turn, Sarah changes the ending to have Kenny die, which forces Tub and Frank dispose of his body in the woods. At this point, the focus of the story turns to Frank, who is overcome with guilt. Sarah writes, ”The entire drive home, Frank was shaking, but not from the cold . . . The whole car ride, he kept thinking of Kenny and how he looked dead covered in the snow. He kept thinking of it so much that he had to stop on the side of the road to throw up and then finally to stop shaking." At the very end, Frank eventually turns himself into the police, which solves what has become a missing person's case. In both cases, the revisions focus on character growth and almost redeem the characters' behavior in the story.

Contrasting with the variety of prompts applied to Wolff's story, the students who adapted O'Connor's "Good Country People" wrote the "next chapter" for the story. As a result, their stories pick up with Hulga's abandonment in the barn, sans prosthetic leg. Interestingly, all of these students chose to fill their revisions with characters reflecting on their varied life decisions, which deepens the development of the characters. For example, Breonna writes Hulga's reflection on meeting Manley:

Although I had only known him for a short time, meeting him would go down in my life book as a great achievement. I finally thought I had found someone who would accept me for who I was. I thought I found someone who would not be intimidated my success in school . . . I thought I had finally found my happiness with someone who I knew I would come to love more and more each day that we spent together."

This student’s characterization of Hulga presents her as someone yearning for acceptance, for finding a "match" that will give her the happiness she has been unable to obtain through education. In addition to Hulga admitting this hope for "joy" and revealing her vulnerability, Breonna uses her revision as an opportunity for mother-daughter bonding. In her revision, Breonna imagines that the mother, Mrs. Hopewell, divulges a clandestine premarital encounter that broke her heart. She writes through Hulga, "My mother revealed to me that I
was the only one who knew about her lifelong secret she had kept from family, friends and most importantly my father. The first question I asked her was how did she deal with pain of being left by someone she felt so deeply for? She gave me answer and it was time."

Breonna goes on to imagine that Hulga transforms her pain into creativity, as she writes through Hulga:

To take up all of the time I had on my hands I began to write. I began to write about the things that I had been through all my life[:] going through life with one leg, going to college, and being the black sheep of your family. As I kept writing I noticed I had filled up several pages of books with my life story. I wanted others to hear about my story and maybe it would help them in some way. All the pain I had endured would mean nothing if I could touch someone's life with my story. If I had not learned anything from my life it was that pain is only temporary and you should be the reason for your happiness. After all [sic] it is your life to live because everyone’s story is different creating thousands of untold stories waiting to be told and wanting to be heard.

The especially powerful aspect of this adaptation is the student's assertion that literature is meaningful because it is a way to transmit ideas that can teach people valuable lessons and help them relate to one another. In essence, literature is therapeutic for the writer and possibly inspirational for the reader.

Acacia's adaptation also leads to a deeper connection between mother and daughter, but adds to this a new-found connection with God. When Hulga does not return home, Mrs. Hopewell develops genuine concern for her daughter, and "went straight to the phone to call around." Deserted in the barn, Hugla yearns for her mother: "As much as Mrs Hopewell annoyed her, she had never longed for her voice and caring attitude so much." At the very end of the story Hulga experiences a massive character shift and develops a belief in god: "'Lord help me,' she prayed aloud. Hulga had no choice but to believe her faith was all she really had, only having one leg an[d] all and not being that pretty. She sat on the edge of the hole with her one good leg on the third step of the ladder." Acacia's interpretation of the character's relationship with God is intriguing because Hulga's prayer
for "help" results in her own empowerment, as she is poised to maneuver herself down the ladder on her own as the story ends. The student's insistence that Hulga "had no choice but to believe her faith was all she really had" is perhaps purposefully aligned with O'Connor's own spiritual values, which were studied alongside the story. This added element suggests that this project also facilitates an understanding of the story's context.

In the same vein as the mother-daughter relationships above, students also chose to further develop and explore the father-son relationships in their adaptations. In her "next chapter" of *Doubt*, Mimi gives voice to Donald Muller, who has no voice in the play. In doing so, she is able to underscore what she interpreted as the positive force of Father Flynn in Donald Muller's life while testifying to the negative effects of racism on the child's life. She writes through Donald, who is talking to Sister James:

> why is it such a terrible thing to be black? Every day, I get bullied by other students; they would push me in the hall way [sic]. School isn't a home for me, I understand. But what about my aggressive father at home? Nowhere is home for me! Father Flynn was the only one who understands [sic] me and cares for me other than my mother but where is he now? I have to suffer every day and it is simply because I'm black[,] sister.

In writing this, Mimi openly addresses the racism that John Patrick Shanley hints at and corrects what she sees as a fault in the play: the absence of Muller's voice. Mimi manages to simultaneously exonerate (perhaps) Father Flynn and bluntly illustrate the racial tension of the period.

Much like Mimi gives Muller a voice, Princeton gives Troy a voice in his "genre swap" / "next chapter" adaptation of *Fences*. Princeton also assumes the voice of Raynelle, who is writing down the thoughts of her father. According to his writer's statement, Raynelle is exploring creative writing, hence her choice to write her father's story in poetic form. Princeton's multi-layered approach to this adaptation reveals a nuanced understanding of Wilson's characters as well as the powerful connection between family bond and narrative construct. Moreover, his decision to use Raynelle artfully solves the problem of how to transmit the apology to the absent son. Through his adaptation, Princeton reveals a desire
to establish healing and closure in the father-son relationship. His first step is to explain why Troy became abusive toward his son. He writes, "I stood there watch you go/ You saw me as a tyrant I know/. . . The man who filled your life with screams/ All because of a past that will never go/ Created by another tyrant from long ago." He then shows Troy's ability to learn from his mistakes through his care for Raynelle: "This is my last chance to get it right and raise a child in the light/. . . so don't worry son I will be sure to get it right the third time." Nixon closes with Troy's desire to be with and apologize to his son: "I just wish your [sic] were here/ so I [could] talk to you one last time before I disappear/ for I fear the golden gates for me may not appear/ even so I wanted you to know/ I love son and I'm sorry I hurt you/ I just wish I could tell you before I go." And since Raynelle is the keeper of his words and commits them to paper, Princeton establishes hope that the son will hear the father's plea and that the relationship will be healed, even if posthumously.

Taking a different approach to the father-son bond, Michael adapted Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* in a series of poems, one of which is entitled "Under the Cat's Paw." In his poem, Michael underscores Spiegelman's resentment of his father. At the opening of the poem, Art asks, "What is your story? What do you see?/ What calls in your mind when your eyes are unfocused?/ What secrets and evils are hid in your head?/ I thought I would I ask. I thought I would write./ So here I am now to see what you'll say." Michael goes on to tell the father's story in a flash of images complemented by a doleful rhythm: "Cat and mouse. Chase and run. Hide and fail. Blood in the streets. Blood on the doors. Blood on the stairs./ Death in the town. Death in the camp. Death in the air. . . . The indifference of predator to the hate and the fate of his prey./ A tattoo of numbers to mark the living./ Gas and grave to signal the dead." At the end, Michael imagines Art's struggle between telling his father's story and reconciling his father's destruction of the mother's diaries: "A story worth writing but hard in repeating./ They tried to kill you and failed./ But you killed her./ You Monster./ You killed her. You killed her./ And there's nothing left for me." As Michael's last line shows, the challenge of these father-son relationships is the legacy left to the son. These adaptations challenge social norms of father-son relationship while revealing how the characters continue to yearn for connection, or at least how some young readers may yearn for it.
This inability to connect and the question of legacy appears in the last example in this section, Ottoman's adaptation of Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" into a poem, which foregrounds a relationship between a father and a daughter. Unlike the other students in the class, Ottoman adopted an unambiguously humorous tone in his adaptation, likely because, as he states in his writer's statement, "this story strikes me as a very peculiar one." Ottoman also notes in his writer's statement that he was concerned about "sounding cheesy or way too off topic," which also sheds light on why he might choose a humorous tone for Faulkner's controversial tale. Beyond the humor, what is instantly noticeable about his adaptation is the mindful couplet rhyme schemes, the alliteration, and the regular beats. This was purposeful on Ottoman's behalf, as he notes in his writer's statement: "I wanted to include as many key elements of the story as I could. Then I tried to add as many rhymes as I could with added rhythm and just a little bit of humor." Ottoman displays here an understanding of the story as well as poetic conventions.

Ottoman positions Emily as a woman who has grown accustomed to being controlled by men. In the beginning, her marriageability is limited by her father, "All the townsmen wanted her as their bride,/ But her father didn't like them,/ Indeed he had too much pride,/ All this back-fired [sic] when at the table he died,/ Choked up on chicken that was fried." This humorous addition shows that Algerian-born Ottoman is aware of Southern conventions; the use of the fried chicken underscores the southern setting. The loss of her father is too much for Emily to bear until another man who could potentially control her appears: "When her father passed it was the fact she couldn't accept,/ So she sat excluded in her house and wept./ After they took his body she thought of ending it,/ Till she met the man of her dreams and decided on extending it." However, as we know, Homer has no intention of staying with Emily, and so: "After a night of romance it was clear of Homer's intentions,/ Because he left after he finished with her, her sidewalk and its dimensions." In addition to a clever rhyme, Ottoman also introduces a motive for Emily's potential murder and necrophilia. In doing so, he fills in what many students perceive as a narrative gap, which displays an awareness of conflict and its role in driving a narrative.
Student Reflection Survey

Evidence of students' metacognition was collected via a brief "reflection" survey on the challenges of and skills gained by completing the assignment. In an effort to obtain the most honest answers possible, students were not prepped for these questions and were not aware that a survey of this nature was taking place. While it is possible that language from the assignment sheet could "feed" answers to the students, my hope was that the assignment sheet was a more distant memory than their actual experiences and attitudes at the present moment. To collect data, students were verbally posed a series of questions at the close of the final exam period and asked to handwrite their answers. These questions were:

- Was the creative project a good or reliable measure of what you learned this semester? In what other classes, if any, would a creative project be a beneficial way of ending the semester? Why? Why did you choose to work in the genre you chose? Why did you choose to work with this piece of literature? What did you like/enjoy about the assignment and the course? What, if any, improvements might your instructor make to the creative assignment?

Overall, all but one of the 23 students surveyed asserted that the creative final project was a "good or reliable measure of what you learned this semester." And while three students did not believe that a creative project be a beneficial way of ending the semester in other classes, the remaining 21 students believed it be beneficial and provided examples of classes that might incorporate a project like this. It is not surprising that students mentioned that a creative project would be applicable to English, composition, myth and human culture, and the humanities in general. But then three students noted that this would be a "beneficial way to end any class," while others suggested history and western civilization. Perhaps even more surprisingly, students listed psychology, abnormal psychology, and chemistry as candidates for a creative final project. And though one student noted that "math class would be a challenge," the suggestion makes it clear that the student was trying to apply the project to what many students unfairly perceive as the "least" creative discipline, which is intriguing in itself.
When asked why they chose to write in their genre, only seven students responded to the question. The shortage of responses suggests perhaps that the students could not reflect on this concept in the time allowed to complete the survey, but it also might suggest that some students remained unfamiliar with the term "genre" and/or did not understand the question. The responses that were collected, however, provide insight into the students' perceptions of various genres. For example, two students said that they chose to write a short story because it somehow enabled creative expression. One student wrote, "it felt easy and I was able to let the ideas flow out of my brain easy" and another student wrote, "I feel like I could get all my thoughts out easier." Another student felt that the short story genre provided him/her with "a lot to work with," while another admitted that s/he "chose the short story because I am new at creative writing and it seemed like a good place to start." Two students stated that they chose poetry because they either "had a history writing poetry" or because they "wanted to show expression and emotion." It is unclear why prose does not allow expression and emotion in this student's view, but the comment suggests that poetry speaks to this student in a unique and powerful way. Another student noted that s/he originally wanted to create a mixed media piece of art for "The Yellow Wallpaper," but had too many time limitations, and so chose the director's proposal option. Another student similarly noted that s/he "chose to write an essay because [he/she is] not very creative."

This statement reverberates through a class whenever a creative project is introduced. Of course many students discover that they are, indeed, creative. But many other never allow themselves to push past this idea of themselves, which may indicate the extent to which our educational system has deprived them of opportunities for using their creative skills.

When students were asked why they selected their piece of literature answers ranged from comprehension to audience satisfaction to personal and experiential reasons. Two students wrote that they chose their story because they felt familiar with it and understood it, which increased their confidence in adapting it. Four students, split equally between "Hunter in the Snow and "Story of an Hour," commented that they chose to adapt the story because they either "hated" the original ending or "wanted a different ending." More specifically, the two students that adapted "Hunters in the Snow" observed that the lack of a definite ending, with so many loose ends, led them to resolve these mysteries through their adaptation. Along similar lines, the ambiguity in *Doubt* led the student to adapt
the play because s/he "really want[s] Father Flynn to be a good person." Two more students said that they chose *Maus* and "The Things They Carried" because the stories were "powerful." Two of the students who responded to this question revealed that they identified with the chosen story on a personal level. One wrote, "I chose the short story because I could relate to the character in the story through my own personal experiences with love and family" and the other wrote, "I chose Fences because my family has been touched by adultery and illegitimate children." These comments show that students were engaging with the literature, interested in solving problems raised by the literature, and relating the works to their own lives and experience.

When posed the question of what they liked and/or enjoyed about the assignment and the course, students' responses provided insight into their diverse educational goals and how they perceive institutionalized learning. The feedback can be organized into two categories: skills built and creativity accessed. According to the students, the skills obtained through this activity include the increased ability to "adapt," engagement of critical thinking skills, effective review of course materials, a deeper understanding of historical context, increased tolerance of other's views, and useful practice of presentation skills. For one student, the project was an effective semester review: "it helped me relate to the author and recap things I learned throughout the semester about what goes into a well developed [sic] piece of literature." Another student displayed an understanding of historical context: "I learned that things were a lot different back in the day than it is today, that influenced decisions." Two students noted valuable interpersonal skills: that they "enjoyed experiencing the different viewpoints" and "learned a great deal of tolerance and acceptance of other's views and presentations." Perhaps most importantly, one student observed that "the project made me branch out of my comfort zone," which is a valued experience in liberal arts education.

The most telling responses obtained in this survey arrived in the form of students' commentary on creativity. Over half the surveyed students mentioned "creativity" in response to what they liked about the assignment, but what is really surprising is what they say *about* creativity. To begin, students appear to connect the ability to determine the content of their work with a feeling of "freedom." For example, a student wrote: "I liked the fact that this project had a lot of leeway which allowed a lot of diversity and also allowed our
true creativity to shine instead of following strict directions."

The phrases used here—"true creativity" versus "strict directions"—indicate a perceived separation between what might be a "true" or "authentic" form of unique expression (however troubling those concepts may be) and rote assignment completion more in line with Friere's banking concept of education, "in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (Friere 72). As such, this student seems to intuit Friere's concern that in our current teaching model "it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge" (72). Along similar lines, another student wrote: "I loved that we had options to do whatever we wanted. The freedom made me gain my creativity back." The verb phrase "gain back" calls forth an image of something that has been stripped away being returned, and in this case it is the perceived "freedom" of the assignment that facilitated this return. Another student asserted that the assignment, "gave the freedom to do what we want and express ourselves. [I]t showed how everybody interprets stories and has their own unique ideas about things." In addition to linking freedom with expression, this quote also reveals that students enjoy hearing each other's ideas and innovations as much as (if not more so) than developing their own unique approaches. Students also specifically used the word "imagination" in reference to the most enjoyable aspect of the creative assignment. One wrote: "it was nice to just use my imagination and there not to be really any rules about what is right or wrong," even despite the class's awareness of a rubric upon which the assignment would be graded and specific expectations that the assignment had to meet in order to be accepted for credit. Another student claimed: "I feel like this creative project let me use my imagination in so many ways. It gave me a chance to put my own spin on my favorite story." This enjoyment of "putting [one's] own spin" on a story is not surprising, considering that American popular culture currently features an endless supply of books, films, and television programs that rewrite histories, fairy tales, and myths. However, these entries were surprising because the word "imagination" was not a centerpiece of any aspect of the class and never arose in discussion, which was less intentional and more rooted in the technique-oriented focus of the course. Often when we study literature at the graduate and professional levels, the author's imagination is not what is important to the literary scholar; what tends to be
emphasized is the author's intent, message, context, or connection to critical theory. If one were to present a paper at a leading conference and offer an analysis of the author's "imagination," the critical response would hardly be supportive. However, to these students who are—ultimately—the only audience that actually matters, the concept of firing up one's imagination and using this tool to innovate and create is valuable and meaningful.

The verb phrases used by students' when discussing creativity are especially telling. The students entered the following statements: "I realized I am capable of writing a short story;" "Doing the creative project really made me have to use my creativeness;" and "It's always good to get my creativity back from this kind of project" (italics used for emphasis). The italicized words here speak volumes regarding the benefit of this assignment. The first phrase—"capable of"—underscores the student's new-found ability: that he or she has the ability to create the very thing that the course has deemed worthy of critical study, which harkens back to Bloom's point that creative prompts such as these enable the student to become the producer as well as the consumer of a text. This brief statement also implies that the student feels ownership of the skills learned in the class and can conceive of his or her ability to surpass the role of student (the one who studies) and become the artist (the one who is studied).

The second phrase—"made me have to use"—emphasizes that engaging one's creativity is neither an easy nor necessarily desired task. The phrase also suggests that the student does not usually use skills he or she perceives as "creative," though that may not be the case. In this situation, clarifying what is a creative act could be a fruitful place to begin. This observation also shows that students need to be pushed to use creativity and to be creative, rather than answering prompts and completing assignments with which they have grown comfortable. Along similar lines, the third phrase—"get my creativity back"—is the most revealing of all. This statement highlights a loss the student has felt during the educational journey; the statement suggests that at some point the creativity was present, but over an unstated period of time, it was lost, or—more specifically—taken away. His or her phrasing shows that this lost ability has been returned through this assignment. In doing so, we may assume that the student is experiencing a sense of wholeness, completion. Clearly, the student values this wholeness because it is classified as "always good." Along similar lines, another student mentioned that through this assignment he or she "got a little
of my creativity that is normal(ly) drained from me during school back" and another wrote, "this project was extremely helpful in me expressing whatever creativity is left in my mind." The phrases "drained from me" and "whatever . . . is left" further prove that students feel that current approaches to education are taking something from them, rather than giving something to them, the latter of which is (ironically) a central goal of education. This assignment's ability to re-inspire students' creativity is best captured in this student's testimony:

This class was a creative outlet . . . an oasis. This class was thought-provoking and entertaining[.] It was a stress reliever in the midst of so much work during final exam week. This project has inspired me to not only finish the mixed-media work of art that I had started, but to also start working on personal art projects again. It has been such a long time since I have done anything like this and it feels good to have fresh ideas along with the motivation to get them down[.]

This comment is brimming with insight that needs to be unpacked. First, note that the student differentiates "this" class from his or her other classes by calling it a "creative outlet" and an "oasis." These terms are powerful. The idea that the class is an "outlet" suggests that it provides the student a way to funnel out the latent creative energies knocking about within him or her, which results in pleasant feelings of release that often accompany creative forms of expression. Additionally, the concept that this class is an "oasis" represents the class as a place of refuge, an escape from the rest of the academic world; the following comment about the class acting as a "stress reliever" further supports this metaphor. The student then relates the experience of the project to his or her life beyond the classroom, to the engagement in and completion of "personal art projects." Not only does the student report "fresh ideas," but also a renewed "motivation" to work on these projects. Perhaps what is most important here is how the student reveals the interconnectedness between academic engagement and personal motivation/creation. In doing so, the student breaks down the artificial divide between "what happens in school" and "what happens in real life." A deep, meaningful education stretches far beyond the
classroom, the degree, or even the immediate profession obtained as a result of that education and enriches the actual life of the student.

To move forward, this student's comment regarding the project as a stress-reliever reappeared in a number of other responses. One student wrote, "the stress at finals is gone," which could mean that delivering the creative project helped to relieve finals-week stress or that the creation of the project relieved the stress of other finals. Another student reinforced this idea with "the element of it being a 'final' was great stress reliever." This student also asserted that the assignment should remain an equivalent of the "final" because of its stress-relieving quality. Along similar lines, another student wrote that the assignment "relieves stress and allows us to think freely. It allowed me to attempt being a bit creative, which I haven't really done." These statements reflect contemporary findings on the benefit of creative acts to relieve stress, as we observe in the field of art therapy, for instance (Curl 165; Stuckey and Nobel). These additions seem to underscore the extent to which the students found the project rewarding, interesting and, evidently, relaxing.

Conclusion

The most valuable aspect of any reflection on a pedagogical endeavor is exploring how the assignment might be improved. When surveyed, students had only a few suggestions for improvement. The three who believed there should be a change to the project added requirements to the assignment rather than reducing the requirements of the assignment. One student suggested—surprisingly—that the "maximum amount of pages" be "bigger, to give more options for ideas." It is unusual to hear a student yearn for a longer page requirement, so this comment could show that the student enjoyed the work and wanted to keep writing. The comment also might suggest that the student felt limited by the page range (planned based on available reading time during the final period) and wanted to expand his or her response into a form that stretched beyond the prompts provided. Either way, the desire for more page length is a good sign. Another student recommended that students be required to present a visual with their work. This idea suggests a few possibilities: students could create PowerPoints or Prezis to show alongside their work, or they could create original art to accompany their reading, or they could create a sort of
video/photocollage to play in the background while they read their work. It is unclear exactly what the students intended by "visual," but the inclination toward a visual complement to the aural element of the project aligns with research on Millennial student characteristics, namely that these students are visual learners (Matulich; Twenge). For example, in Educating the Net Generation, Oblinger and Oblinger assert that these students are "intuitive visual communicators" (2.5) and that their generation is "more visually literate than earlier generations" (2.14). Coats takes this point a step further and posits that this group is "the most visual of all learning cohorts" (126).

A separate student suggested as an improvement/change to this project in the future "partnering with another person in the class," which also aligns with another Millennial student characteristic: collaborative learning (Wilson; Twenge; Oblinger). The students in the class had been assigned a wide variety of high and low stakes group work from the beginning of the semester, so it is likely that this student enjoyed that aspect of the course and/or felt that it had become almost standard to the course. In hindsight, the individual nature of the final project does almost run counter to the approach required by the majority of class projects. However, this project's pedagogical intent as a creative approach to summative assessment necessitated individual effort as a way to measure each student's depth of comprehension.

To begin, scaffolding the assignment into the last few weeks of class or sprinkled throughout the semester may have yielded even better results than those shown here. Along the same lines, while a review of literary terms was built in to our schedule through final exam preparation (held a week before the assignment was due), perhaps a more in-depth review directly related to the creative assignment would have served the students well and provided a more contextualized review for the final exam. Additionally, peer review would be a valuable addition to the process for many reasons. Austen suggests that a process of peer feedback could help with the grading of creative work by "de-centering the assessment process so that evaluation is conducted not just by the instructor but also by the writer's peers and the writer him/herself" (148). Peer review also could address the lack of proofreading evident in the submissions. For example, it might be helpful to discuss the role of editors in the process of publishing and to create an exercise in which the students become "editors" of each other's work. Related to this concept would be a larger
assignment in which the students work together to create a literary magazine that contains each other's creative projects. This would create an opportunity for experiential learning and allow the students to leave the class with an artifact in hand. This artifact could, potentially, be linked to Student Learning Outcomes and used as an assessment measure.

Thanks to the rise of Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) in higher education, we have a renewed appreciation for writing as an educational tool rather than solely an assessment tool. Writing to Learn has become a cornerstone of WAC pedagogy for many reasons: it can fit into any class period and/or subject, it is "low stakes" writing, it can meet an array of goals and it is quick to perform and to "evaluate," so it does not consume too much of the instructor's time. Toby Fulwiler and Art Young differentiate writing to learn from what James Briton calls "transactional writing," which "means writing to accomplish something, to inform, instruct, or persuade" (x). In their view, the writing to learn approach is different. We write to ourselves as well as talk with others to objectify our perceptions of reality; the primary function of this 'expressive' language is not to communicate, but to order and represent experience to our own understanding. In this sense language provides us with a unique way of knowing and becomes a tool for discovering, for shaping meaning, and for reaching understanding. (x)

And though higher education has appeared to adopt this use of writing, most often these strategies favor academic and analytical writing over creative expression. In doing so, we miss an opportunity, or many opportunities. As the students above have demonstrated, they can illustrate an understanding of a concept while engaging it in a creative way--the two skills are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, the fundamental academic writing skills developed during this "creative" project--working with a source, understanding plagiarism, critical thinking, problem solving, etc.--transfer to almost every subject and course. And the reality is that all of these skills are creative and are improved by access to and development of creativity.
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