

Developing an Emerging Authors K-12 Creative Writing Curriculum

2010 Post-Fellowship Reporting: Curriculum Implementation

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Fellowship: How The Pros Do It: Creative Writing and Instruction

Original Expectations

My fellowship involved attending the week long Humber School for Writers Summer Program, Toronto, Canada and observing highly successful, professional writers teaching writing to emerging writers, ages 18 - 82. My intention was to observe and record a wide range of instructional approaches, discerning which strategies would easily transcribe into a secondary English classroom setting, and then return to my classroom to experiment with these strategies. From researching the curriculum of other professional summer writing programs, I fully expected formal textbook instruction as well as close-editing conferencing and planned for how I would emulate these experiences within my own classroom. As well, I especially looked forward to working with my writing instructor, Alistair MacLeod, renowned as Canada's greatest living writer and esteemed by many as the definitive master of the short story in English, because he is a Professor Emeritus in Creative Writing (retired) at the University of Windsor. I anticipated many long conversations about what uniquely characterizes Humber writing instruction, all with the intention of someday bringing hybrids of this pedagogy into to my English classroom.

Expectations Abandoned

By Tuesday morning, I felt I had no choice but to give up trying to fulfill my original expectations of the Humber Summer Writing Program. Yes, I observed many different professional writers, all working with emerging writers, and yes, each instructor utilized a wide range of instructional approaches – some more avant-garde than others – but every teacher-student interaction I observed defied transcription into a formalized, “graded” teaching strategy appropriate to the secondary classroom. None of the instructors (they preferred being called mentors) used textbooks, though they recommended many to me once they found out I was a teacher and was thinking of starting a creative writing program in my high school. Likewise, none of the mentors bothered with formal skill-building exercises, though many felt such exercises had merit in a formal creative writing class, and, finally, none of the mentors provided close-editing of student text, though some did offer oral reactions to poor choices in grammar, punctuation, diction, verb tense agreement, and consistency in narrative voice. While there was clear identification of strengths and weaknesses in writing being shared within these groups, there was no “instructional center,” so to speak. Most mentors simply opened up their classes to make everyone equal and then encouraged dialogue, and of these mentors, very few felt compelled to guide the dialogue into “teachable

moments.” While writers received lengthy oral reactions to their work, there were no required practice methods in place wherein writers would actually revise according to these reactions. There was nothing traditionally “school-like” about anything I was experiencing, which was jarringly odd given that we were all grouped inside college classrooms and lecture halls, and we slept in college dorm rooms at night. All interactions between mentors and students seemed little more than simple conversation, while I had been expecting a much more formal writing studio educational approach given my first impressions of the Humber School for Writers website.

At first, I was completely disheartened. Had I spent thousands of dollars to essentially attend a program that was little more than small groups of people talking informally about writing – much like you would see in a coffee house or bookstore? Where was the world-class instruction I had read about on the Humber website? Where was the highly effective conferencing that inspired 25% of Humber graduates to continue on to publish books and win the most prestigious writing awards in Canada, namely the Giller Prize and the Lieutenant Governor’s Medal? How was any of this going to find its way into my classroom?

Expectations Reconfigured

Once I gave up trying to fulfill my original expectations and got over the sense of dejection I felt for having got myself into a situation that very well might not produce anything viable in my own teaching, my eyes slowly opened to what the Humber School for Writers Summer Program is all about, why its graduates rave about the experience as intensely educational.

For me, what really opened my experience up was Wednesday morning’s classroom meeting, but to understand this single moment, I have to backtrack a little. I had arrived at the school the previous Friday and attended excellent, business-like seminars in publishing and agenting on Saturday and Sunday. Monday and Tuesday mornings, my small class met with Mr. MacLeod and we all gave our general reactions to student manuscripts, with the approach and tone of these discussions jarringly informal and non-academic, as I’ve mentioned. Sunday night, after receiving my classmates’ manuscripts, I had prepared extensive close editing of text, identifying specific weaknesses in diction, verb tense and voice development and prepared a thorough written critique illustrating my reaction for each manuscript. Additionally, I had at least six different writing exercises I was going to suggest to each writer to increase awareness and strengths. Mr. MacLeod’s informal orchestration of the class, however, made my prepared work seem completely inappropriate. “Tell us what you thought,” was all Mr. MacLeod asked.

When I brought out my work and began going through it, preparing to present what I had thought of the writing and what work could be done to improve it, Mr. MacLeod simply raised his eyebrows and asked, “Do you really need all of that?” Sheepishly, I put

away my written commentary and began what was nothing more than a lengthy summary of the commentary I had just put away before I was immediately interrupted.

“Just tell us what you felt, Paul.”

I don't remember very much of what I said after that point, anxious as I was to participate in some way, but I do remember telling the writer about how her main character seemed more lost than menacing (he was supposed to be menacing). Our conversation in front of the class drew out more discussion from others, and before we knew it, three and a half hours had elapsed. I remember going to lunch and eating by myself, wondering again how I would ever use any of this in my classes, if it might be too late to have my tuition refunded so I could pay back Fund for Teachers.

I was surprised, to say the least, when the writer approached me the next morning and thanked me profusely. She said she had had only a few, rare opportunities to discuss her work so deeply, and she had spent most of the previous night rewriting based on the discussion I had started in class. What I've figured out since (but had no idea then) was that our mentor, Mr. MacLeod, sensed almost intuitively from her text that she was at a very advanced stage of development, so much so that all she required was genuine emotional response from readers to be able to see for herself how she could rewrite her final draft and complete her story. Her revisions, which she gladly shared with me, stopped me dead in my tracks. As I sat there, college students half my age chatting away next to me, I read her work and saw that what she had done to change the character reflected the exact written commentary I had prepared for her manuscript two nights before. It seemed so eerie that I asked her if I had specifically told her to make these changes. “No,” she responded, “but what you got the class talking about with regards to full dimensional portrait of a main character, well, that allowed me to see the character from the outside in. He's a way more scary a guy now and so the ending isn't so predictable. Revising just *him* saved me a ton of work.”

That was Tuesday. Next, it was Wednesday morning -- my turn for the class to react to my manuscript. The fifteen page cutting from my novel, “The Honor Song of Dreamer MacIsaac” was taken from a section I had drafted almost four years earlier, and it had undergone perhaps a dozen rewrites and at least as many revisions. My process for writing the novel was exceedingly disciplined, much more so than any other writing project I had ever attempted. For four years, I wrote very early in the mornings on the weekend during the school year, on snow days off from school, and practically every morning during my school vacations. Typically, I produced 10-20 pages of draft on weekends alone and hundreds of pages per month during the summers accumulating the current draft of the story at 1500 typed pages. I began the project more as a personal challenge than anything else and knew within six months of starting that I would produce a lengthy draft. I had experimented quite successfully with a three part interwoven narrative, each part told by the same character but each stylized differently. Also, my novel spanned three generations and focused thematically on the magical realism of Mi'kmaq spirituality – the story itself originating in a vision that comes to an old Mi'kmaq woman while in a sweat lodge. Of course, by the time I finished, I

suspected my lengthy novel would garner almost no interest from publishers, and before attending the Humber School, it hadn't. I was torn between dismantling my long story and reassembling it as much shorter work -- something highly recommended to me by Mr. MacLeod and other published writers who had heard of my gargantuan manuscript -- or continuing to polish it on my own while I diligently kept searching for a publisher willing to take on the risk of trying to sell such a lengthy work written by a first time novelist.

What I learned Wednesday morning, though, changed everything about my self-concept as a writer. As the class opened, initial reactions to my fifteen-page cutting were highly complimentary, which is always a good thing given that writing is a very lonely vocation and so writers crave validation whenever they can find it. However, the informal discussion format of the class did little to convince me that my classmates' reactions would be very specific, and so I expected little more than empty, directionless enthusiasm.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

The discussion of my work began and I took out my pencil and notebook and prepared to take notes. Unknown to me, my classmates had been very much looking forward to discussing my work so when Mr. MacLeod asked for short, general reactions to get the discussion going, small but intense bursts of enthusiastic praise erupted from the everyone. I was flabbergasted and slightly embarrassed. I had spent two decades essentially alone with my work, teaching myself how to write by reading creative writing textbooks, diligently practicing various exercises, test-flying writing strategies in my classes and generally conditioning myself to believe that my academic discipline would someday translate into artistic accomplishment. I arrived in Toronto completely unaware of the progress I had made and fully expected my experience in the Summer Writing program would only highlight all that I still had to learn about the basics of writing. Yes, like most first-time writers who steel themselves to always be confident, I believed in my novel, thought it was strong, but I was also very much convinced that I was the last person to decide if it was worthy of publication. That decision was for others to make, and judging from the reaction of my classmates, they felt publication was imminent and deserving. As each of my classmates developed their reactions more fully, I was stunned by how deeply they penetrated the structures of my story, how precise their praise really was. When I write and revise, I do so because I see weaknesses in my storytelling and work conscientiously to correct for them. Every compliment I heard -- all of which I furiously copied down in order to remember later -- addressed a specific repair I had carried through in an earlier draft. Later, in a private meeting with Mr. MacLeod, I explained this and he nodded his head and replied, "This is what happens when writing touches the universal." I didn't know what to say. I mean, one of the finest writers in the world had just told me that my writing had transcended into the universal; what do I say in return other than thank you? He only smiled at me and continued on, saying, "They're right, you know. Your writing is very, very good. It is only a matter of time now, but you have to cut the book down to something they can sell, or write another shorter novel, get success, you know, and then you can ask them

to look at the first book again. It's up to you, but you're done becoming a writer, Paul. You're there."

I almost cried.

Bringing Creative Writing into Own: An "Emerging Author's" K-12 Curriculum

As of today, September 30, 2010, the final day I can turn in my plans for curriculum implementation with the Rural School and Community Trust Program, I am still trying to discern how I can distill my experience at the Humber School for Writer's Summer Program into a secondary high school setting, though I do have direction and purpose. My own experiences becoming a writer testify both to the importance of formal writing instruction and the value of highly informed (but chiefly unstructured) peer response forum. In my district, creative writing is taught as only an auxiliary exercise aimed at achieving other learning objectives. For example, a sixth grade teacher working on a Holocaust unit centered on literary study of Eli Weisel's *Night* may ask students to compose a diary entry as if they were prisoners in the camp alongside the author and his father. My goal is to bring creative writing into its own within my district, and from conversations I've already had with teachers of all grade levels, my best bet is to embed creative writing instruction within our Gifted and Talented Program, which, ironically, has been significantly cut this year. Students who show sustained interest and dedication to writing will have to be identified as early as possible and nurtured over time in elementary school, middle school and early high school, with the goal being that they write as often as possible in order to think of themselves as writers. Juniors and seniors in high school who have progressed through this skill-building curriculum will then be able to engage in a manuscript-based peer response forum, very much resembling the experience I had at the Humber School.

Building a creative writing curriculum district-wide, from the ground up will be no small task. Presently, I am at the conversational stage, engaging teachers from all grade levels to share what they believe a creative writing curriculum should be like. I've met with both enthusiasm and reserved non-support, but I can honestly say that every conversation has increased my understanding of what can be done right away and what will take time. Once I've spoken with teachers, I will progress on to discuss my ideas with district-level administrators. As I write this, I am beginning to research the teaching of creative writing in elementary and middle school settings, age groups completely outside of my teaching experience. Even though I am only beginning, a few guiding principles have emerged from my early conversations, and I am using these as cornerstones for shaping the "Emerging Authors" creative writing curriculum I hope to develop:

- Creative writing instruction should begin with a student's first experiences with literacy in kindergarten.
- Students should be taught early in life to think of themselves as writers, and then work to prove this to be true.

- Late elementary students should practice all types of creative writing exercises until they begin finding their own voice and then shift their study inward to draw out the stories waiting inside them.
- All middle school and high school instruction should be manuscript-centered, with the instructor offering little more than a reader's response. All revisions to manuscripts must be made by students, not teachers because a creative writing teacher's role should be to shift all responsibility for growth back to the writer.
- Emerging writers should spend as much time reading as they do writing, and the authors they read should be ones with whom they share a common vision.