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## Use of Creative Writing to Change Students' Perceptions of Essays

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# Using Creative Writing to Change Students’ Perceptions of Essays

By: Amy Bannon

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## Research Question

*How do students’ perceptions of writing essays change when creative writing is incorporated into the writing process?*

Student resistance to writing formally structured essays is a common roadblock found within the high school classroom across disciplines. Offering an alternative to formal essays, creative writing provides students with a less rigid opportunity for exploring ideas and communicating personal viewpoints. I investigated how creative writing might prelude or accompany the formal essay writing process and examined the impact on students’ attitudes towards writing

## Literature

### The Big Question

“How can we give students the confidence to write, and how can we ensure that they flex their writing muscles so that essays and other written work do not come as such a shock?” (McVey, 2008, p. 292)

### Detachment from Academic Writing

“[Students] feel the need to master this arcane skill . . . in the belief that long words, convoluted sentences and interminable paragraphs will somehow magically generate ‘academic’ writing.” (Ahmed & McMahon, 2006, p. 5)

### Neglecting Creative Writing

“And then there is the problem that all writing has to be assessed . . . It’s easy to mark spelling, less easy to quantify the amount of creativity.” (McMahon, 2004, p. 36)

### Making Writing Meaningful

“[T]he level of clarity and depth in their writing will not only increase, but they will be more likely to engage in their work if they can connect to the experience they bring to the classroom.” (O’Farrell, 2005, p. 150)

### All Writing is Creative

“Any writing . . . uses the raw materials of language, experience, knowledge, textual sources and the author’s own ideas and imaginings to bring something into existence that did not exist before.” (McVey, 2008, p. 289)

## Context

### Targeted Classroom:

10<sup>th</sup> Grade American Literature and Composition

- Untracked, mandatory course
- 29 students (14-15 years old)
- 15 females, 14 males
- Very wide range of skill levels

## Methodology

### Student Reflection and Feedback

- Informal poll at beginning of semester
- Written reflections at end of semester

### Creative Writing Assignments

- Focusing on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* unit, encouraged students to creatively explore concepts and literary elements which could later tie into the formal essay

### Essay Writing

- Exposed students to the merging of creative and academic writing by reading satiric essays in class
- Choice of topic for the end-of-the-unit essay (3 prompts)
- Encouraged students to experiment with a more creative approach to liven up their introductions and conclusions

## Preliminary Findings

### Informal Poll/Reflection

1. All but one student said that “Writing is important”
2. Not one student said “Writing is hard” (although almost half said it depended on what they were writing)
3. Stories, journals, and “about my life” were chosen most often as answers to the question: “*What* do you like to write?”
4. All but two students said that doing well on a writing assignment depends on “how interested I am in topic”

## Student Cases \*

1. Ellie
  - Never consistently completed class work
  - Really took to the writing assignments
  - Memorable moment: voluntarily wrote four different page-long versions of assignment instead of simple half page required (wanted to try out all her ideas)

*particular that I remember. It was so vivid it was almost overpowering. It ignited without caution, with a sudden brightness it was almost blinding and it dissolved into the horizon. As soon as it had started it had ended. I blinked in astonishment, wondering if what I saw was even real. I couldn't believe it. I smiled and closed my*

2. Jason
  - Rarely participated in class
  - Previously expressed strong dislike of writing
  - Adapted three creative writing assignments so they became the chapters of a wildly entertaining ongoing story
  - Ended up writing three double-sided, single-spaced papers!
  - Begged to share his work in class
  - Whole class began to beg daily to share writing aloud

*Chapter 3 in my Never ending story of Epic Proportions N  
I was soon lost in the jungle, I spent days searching for help, I began  
to think that it was hopeless, that I would never get the Governor back*

3. Karina
  - Used following creative metaphor throughout essay (“The Salt, the Butter, and the Potatoes”) to describe how Huck’s unique qualities as narrator impact story itself

A potato by itself is good, albeit a little dry, and this is exactly what *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* would be without Huck, dry and in need of flavor. The novel would

\*Student names have been changed.

## Conclusions

- Opportunities for creative writing increase student interest and engagement in composition
- Providing a “real world” purpose or connection in writing is essential for activating student participation
- Small creative writing assignments offer manageable steps for students to explore ideas and transition into longer formal essays
- As personal connection and investment in writing increases, students more naturally establish individual voice and integrate unique perspectives in their academic writing