Introduction to Creative Writing Special Issue

Back in the early 2000s, when Wendy Bishop and I decided to write a book surveying the state of creative writing in North America, we knew previous scholars would have covered certain issues extensively, while other subjects would have been largely ignored. One of those relatively uncharted areas was the teaching of creative writing in the two-year college. Indeed, my *Keywords in Creative Writing* entry on the topic ended up relying extensively on a single article, “Our Corner of the Sky,” an insightful, but decidedly informal, conversation between several instructors published in *TETYC* in 2001. The article’s title was accurate: discussions of the subject occupied, at best, one tiny corner in the vast firmament of writing scholarship.

I wondered for a while if that was all the attention two-year college creative writing might ever receive. Wendy was a powerful and prolific writer, a one-person dynamo generating enthusiasm for creative writing scholarship, but after her death in November 2003, the influence of her version of social expressivism, which was already on the wane, sharply diminished. Panels on creative writing at CCCC conventions began to seem as out of place as a current-traditionalist at a New London Group cocktail party.

In contrast, however, participation in the two-year college caucus at the Associated Writing Programs conference was thriving—members even had their own T-shirts. During the lively annual meetings, writer-teachers debated the best ways to overcome curricular and transfer hurdles, the most effective reading and writing assignments, how to manage the sometimes-volatile combination of experienced and inexperienced students, and whether or not our very existence could be justified in an increasingly vocational era. They also celebrated the strengths of two-year college students—their openness to play and experimentation, their general willingness to take a crack at anything. In short, they had a lot of important things to say about pedagogy and praxis and political reality.

Consequently, not long after Jeff Sommers took over as editor of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, I began asking him if he might allow me to guest-edit a special creative writing issue of the journal. Jeff was receptive, although it took some years for everything to align. In retrospect, I’m happy to have had this extra time, as the energy and enthusiasm of my colleagues around the country has only increased during the past few years.
The issue opens with Maria Brandt’s “Pragmatic Impulses: Starting a Creative Writing Program at the Community College.” Brandt acknowledges that in our tech-driven environment, creative writing classes, especially those offered in the two-year college, seem frivolous to many people. To counter this argument, she points out the relevance of “engagement strategies” in the “creative industries” and calls for an institutional refocus, from STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) to STEAM (the A is for arts, of course). Moreover, as Brandt notes, “the economic value of strong writing skills continues to rise beyond the creative industries into a wide array of employment sectors.” The program she has helped develop at Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York, seeks “to embed critical rigor” in every class, with a focus on undergraduate research and “collaborative relationships off campus.”

Kris Bigalk has taken a similar approach to curricular development in the Twin Cities. “Creative Writing at the Two-Year College: Creating Opportunity and Community” looks at the challenges of developing an associate of fine arts degree at Normandale Community College. For Bigalk, “The bottom line is that students attending community college usually have stressors or challenges in their lives that traditional students do not typically face.” She believes that, in addition to upholding high academic standards, a “successful community college creative writing program creates a space for creative writers to flourish, both in and out of class”; most importantly, it helps students discover their “tribe.”

Not surprisingly, in their cross-talk piece Brandt and Bigalk find much to admire in each other’s programs. Brandt endorses Bigalk’s development of an AFA that “contain[s] enough academic rigor to push our students toward sophistication and integrity.” Like Brandt, Bigalk emphasizes the “best career options are only going to be available to those students who make a commitment to developing the study and time management skills necessary to succeed in the classroom and on the job.” And Brandt would certainly agree with Bigalk that in order to receive the support of administrators, creative writing faculty must in some ways adopt their “values and priorities” and provide them with “hard data” documenting student success.

While TETYC rarely publishes interviews, we were more than happy to accept an interview conducted especially for this issue with Bruce Weigl, one of America’s preeminent poets. After a tour of duty in Vietnam, Weigl began his higher education by enrolling in Lorain County Community College, where he is now a professor. In his interview with Daniel Cleary, “The Circle Made Whole Is a Story,” Weigl discusses a range of issues relating to two-year college creative writing instruction, including suggestions for better serving the latest wave of incoming veterans. A former student of Donald Murray, Weigl not only practices his mentor’s expressivist pedagogy, he also unmistakably carries on Murray’s love of teaching and learning.

Many graduate degree holders in creative writing are now turning to the two-year college for employment, and the next article shows how their expertise can be refocused on developmental composition. Kristine Rae Anderson, Jeffrey
Becker, Mary Cantrell, Phoebe Reeves, and Jill Stukenberg—the five authors of “Diggers in the Garden: The Habits of Mind of Creative Writers in Basic Writing Classrooms”—explore ways that “creative writing can make . . . contributions to the important and meaningful work of teaching basic skills composition, particularly at institutions of access.” For these professors, “a unique aspect of creative writers’ training is the focus on how literary works are created, which requires extensive study of drafts in process.”

In “The Poetic and the Personal: Toward a Pedagogy of Social Equity in English Language Learning,” Patrick Bizzaro and John Baker shift the focus from basic writers to English language learners, examining various ways that creative writing can serve as a resource for that population. Bizzaro and Baker agree with Art Young that “we should use everything at our disposal to teach literacy and learning skills.” The authors’ extensive research has ultimately led them to the conclusion that the ideal genre for teaching literacy is poetry “because scholars have shown in recent years that it provides an opportunity for teachers to link the personal with the students’ genre knowledge.”

The final essay is Jennifer Sinor’s “Deserting the Narrative Line: Teaching the Braided Form,” an elegant look at how students might use literary nonfiction in both the creative writing and composition classrooms. Sinor argues that the “form a writer utilizes—from linear to lyric and everything in between—should depend on what the writer is trying to say, the subject of the piece.” In her opinion, one of the most useful varieties of prose nonfiction is the “braided essay,” in which writers use association rather than linearity to “navigate both chronology and white space, making decisions about when to allow readers to work harder, and when to lead them by the hand.”

The articles collected in the December 2014 edition of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* represent a significant advance in the discussion of community college creative writing instruction and curricular and program design. The contributors, all active writers and passionate advocates for their students, would have been an inspiration to Wendy Bishop, as she has been to so many of them. More than a decade after her passing, I continue to remember Wendy with fondness and awe. This issue is dedicated to her.

—David Starkey, Guest Editor
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