Composition Studies As A Creative Art

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INTRODUCTION

Composition Studies
as a Creative Art

SOME WRITERS' BEGINNINGS: THE STUDENTS IN THIS BOOK

This semester my undergraduate writing class meets in a slightly dilapidated 150-year-old farmhouse, a Designated Historic Site, across the road from the central campus's swath of lush lawns and venerable oaks. Out of the line of devastation from the bulldozers, cranes, and other heavy machinery employed in (re)building the university from the underground up, we are on the flight path of the Canada geese and the blue heron that dwell on the campus pond visible from the front porch. At our first meeting, I suggest that we sit around the large seminar table upstairs, but the students choose the couches that line the elongated living room, Matt and Moya, Chris and Christy, Emily and Jamie and Sean and others we'll meet in a minute. That's where we hang out on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, drinking tea and talking about writing.

We have a syllabus that lays out a lot of writing during the semester—about people, places, performance, science, controversy, humor—even more rewriting, and related readings. And we adhere to the schedule; we have to, to make sure the writing keeps coming and coming and coming some more. Yet I never know exactly what's going to happen during any class, and I suspect the students don't either. Those who can't tolerate being slightly off balance jumped ship in the first week. And the rest, like their teacher, seem to value the elements of surprise, the need to accommodate to the dynamics of a class engaged in finding their own route, their own way to becoming writers, on subjects and in styles that matter to them and to their readers—not just other members of this class, but a larger community. Jasmine's letter to the campus paper, a reasoned critique of all the
construction on campus, has just been published. It is the fourth week of the semester. Her example sets the pace.

Today, for instance, begins with Amrita reading an early draft of her paper on a place, about her return “home” to India for a visit with her “huge family” nine years after her parents had emigrated to New York when she was seven. At debarkation, amidst the heat, the odors, and the crowds, she encountered the passport inspector, “looking at me as if I came from a different planet, commented on my incredibly long nails. . . . He asked me my age, and I replied with a big smile, ‘I am sixteen.’ He said to me, ‘Why does such a young girl like you have such horrible long nails? You should be involved in your education more than in your appearance.’” Although the family dwelling needed “some new tiles;” “a new paint job;” and Amrita was sitting on “the ugliest printed couch I have ever seen” (a lime-and-orange paisley clone, she said, of one in our classroom), the welcome never stopped throughout the long, lazy summer, punctuated by forays to the fruit and vegetable market, and evening rides by rickshaw (“a bike attached to a carriage”) to the ice cream parlor, along teeming streets where orderly traffic “is a joke,” without “lanes or turn signals.”

Amrita finishes reading, visibly nervous but pleased at the impact of her paper on the class. After a round of congratulatory observations (“At your run-in with the customs official, the paper took off”), the dialogue begins, with Mohammed and the paper he wrote about his visit to “the gang of cousins, uncles, and aunts” who always met him at the Karachi airport serving as a satiric counterpoint to Amrita’s return to Delhi: “If deaths due to political terrorism were down to one or two persons a day, things were looking good. If blackouts, also known as ‘load shedding,’ were down to one or two nights a week, things were looking good. If tap water wasn’t as cloudy as it usually is, things were looking good.” Then the questions begin, about bureaucrats, family size and ambience, delivery and interruption of electricity, women’s status, sanitation and disease, innoculations, density of population—and of traffic. Amrita answers, Mohammed corroborates that what she says about India applies to Pakistan as well. “Are there any animals on the streets?” someone asks. “It’s a farm out there!” Amrita explodes. “Imagine being followed by an elephant!” When the laughter subsides, she adds, “and walking where all of them have”—she pauses—“walked.”

What Amrita has presented as a paper with considerable closure has opened up not black holes but a universe of possibilities. “I could write a book,” she exclaims. “I want to deal with being part of two cultures and not losing one while I’m living in the other. And being able to move back and
forth between them. I want to explain my understanding to myself—and to people who haven't been there.” As class ends, she leaves in an exhilaration of opportunity. In the next class, after I read this section of the introduction aloud (“Did I get it right?” “Yes,” said the students, “yes”), Amrita volunteered—amidst a chorus of suggestions of what else to put in the paper (“pedestrians and shopkeepers” “street scenes,” “animals”)—“I'm willing to rewrite this paper as many times as necessary to get across the spirit of my country and my people.” Exactly.

The backbone of another colleague's course with the same title is Aristotleian argumentation. A different colleague focuses on Pagemaker software and desktop publishing; the major project is to write a heavily documented scientific research paper. Across campus, engineering students are writing technical presentations for prospective clients, agriculture students are assessing the consequences of genetic engineering on food production; history students are writing original interpretations of primary documents. There is no single way to teach students to write, and no exclusively right way. You have been introduced to my way. Composition Studies as a Creative Art provides the broader context, of theory, philosophy, pedagogy, and scholarship, from which this teaching emanates.

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT COMPOSITION STUDIES: THE PHILOSOPHY OF THIS BOOK

Through this book in other voices, other rooms, resonate the voices of other students in my classes, from freshman through doctoral students, reinforced by participants in community workshops. They do not always agree, but as they talk to one another they also speak to me. In turn, I incorporate these colloquies in conversation with colleagues, nationally and internationally, via telephone and e-mail, at conferences, in print. These dialogues form the running commentary in my head as I write Composition Studies as a Creative Art.

Talking about composition studies is like talking about love; everybody knows what they mean by the term, few can define it to anyone else's satisfaction, everyone has their own way of doing it. At heart, this is a book about the creative dynamics that arise from the interrelation of writing, teaching writing—and ways of reading, and the scholarship and administrative issues engendered by both. This book is fueled by a mixture of faith in the field and the combination of fields, hope that our efforts can make a difference, and a sense of community in its broadest meaning. For those of us willing to devote our lives to these subjects, composition studies, like love itself, is therefore by necessity a creative art.
Our work, as writers, teachers, scholars, administrators cannot be other than creative. That we work in a complicated, ever-changing world fraught with complex concerns of—among other matters—gender, race and ethnicity, class, economics, and politics is reflected as a major motif in many of the chapters in this book. Because our world is not static, our involvement in it is, ideally, an active, ongoing process, rather than a reactive accommodation to the status quo. The institutions in which we work—colleges, universities, school systems—have a stake in keeping things as they are: “You can’t do that! It’s: impossible/never been done before/out of order/none of your business.” But these same systems have an even more important stake in accommodating creative change, and allowing teachers, scholars, administrators to invent new and potentially useful ways of reinventing, reinterpreting that same universe. So my reaction to “You can’t do that!” has become to take steps, at first timid, then bolder, and now even more risky, to demonstrate “Oh yes I can.” In the process of questioning authority, we assume authority.

Scientists and inventors whose work depends on creativity address this quest with succinct eloquence. Wilson Greatbach, inventor of the implantable pacemaker and thousands of other medical marvels, explains to an interviewer, “The most important factor [in invention] . . . is whether or not you could look at something and wonder, What makes it work? Could I make it better? Inventing takes curiosity; it takes drive; it takes an inability to be discouraged. An inventor is a person who really doesn’t get interested in a problem until it looks impossible” (in K. Brown 29). Albert Einstein reiterates, “The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.” We live the questions while we seek the answers.

WHY I WRITE AND WHAT I WRITE FOR: THE CONTENTS OF THIS BOOK

The essence of regarding composition studies as a creative art is to engage in a process of intellectual or aesthetic free play, and to translate the results of this play into serious work that retains the freedom and play of its origins. Composition Studies as a Creative Art reveals various ways in which I’ve tried to do this in recent years. This book is a collection of my own composition studies written or published since 1990, with the exception of chapter twelve, “Anxious Writers in Context” (1985), an example of writing process research—a particular concern of the 1980s.
Part I is devoted to *Teaching Writing and Teaching Writing Teachers*. Indeed, the entire book is essentially about teaching writing. The pedagogical implications of the Epigraph, “Definition of Poetry” are manifested in chapter one, “Finding a Family, Finding a Voice,” chapter four, “Textual Terror, Textual Power,” and chapter five, “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre.” The thrust of all four is that to understand what writing entails, as both process and product, students should try writing for themselves literature of the sort they’re studying. Teachers have no choice but to set the pace; they too must write early and write often in one or more of the genres they’re teaching. To be credible colleagues in the writing communities such classes create, how can teachers do otherwise? Students themselves comment on how such teaching works, and why it works so well, as co-authors of the dialogue about teaching and writing that constitutes chapter five. The creative stance that I advocate should not seem a radical position, but to many it remains so, and is the cause of “textual terror.” To try such writing oneself, and thereby to gain the authority of “textual power” is to remove much of the threat, for teachers and students alike.

It is not necessary to rehearse here the argument that such writing is not utilitarian and therefore has no place in a college curriculum; Behar, DiPardo, Elbow and Scholes, among others, have addressed that issue in works cited throughout this book. Nor is it necessary to defend here the life, rather than the death, of the author. Although literary theorists (read deconstructionists) and now some composition studies scholars (you know who you are) proclaim the demise of authorship (always, of course, through authored works of their own), authors themselves remain impervious to such critical assaults and continue to write apace—and to be read widely. The writing throughout this book, student and professional alike, speaks eloquently in its own defense.

The two chapters on “Teaching My Class” (chapter two) and “Freshman Composition as a Middle Class Enterprise” (chapter three) identify the not-so-hidden class agendas that pervade college catalogs and curricula (chapter two) and freshman composition textbooks (chapter three). In these I am not arguing that to reinforce middle class values and world view is necessarily the *ideal* of American education, but demonstrating that such is indeed the norm. American society expects its citizens to speak and write in standard English, the *lingua franca* of the country, and to become part of a social structure inside and outside the university that manifests the national virtues, among them clarity, precision, order, and efficiency. That freshman composition is saturated with these values, for the virtues are values, is as inevitable as it is unavoidable.
Part II focuses on *Teaching and Writing Creative Nonfiction*, my particular orientation to the protean and intersecting realms of composition and literature, as explained in chapters seven, eight, and nine. Chapter nine "Why Don't We Write What We Teach? And Publish It?" calls for major changes in the writing and style of professional publication that are analogous to the student writing I characterize in chapter seven, "Creative Nonfiction, Is There Any Other Kind?" The fact that no writing exists without a context—or a myriad of the contexts encompassed by the term political—is examined in chapter five, "American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre," with particular application to the teaching of autobiographical writings in freshman composition and in undergraduate literature courses. Chapter five also illustrates that the ideas discussed in chapters seven and nine in relation to advanced composition are applicable as well to the writing of essays in freshman composition and in a variety of other contexts, in and out of school.

Two other creative nonfiction essays in this section, chapters six and ten, practice what I preach in the other chapters, as do the narrative fragments of chapter eight. I wish that my experiences of "Teaching College English as a Woman" (chapter six), as an adjunct and as a writing director, were now of historical significance only, as some of the academy's more blatantly sexist practices have become. Yet judging from statistics on the increasing number of part-timers nationwide, from the anguished correspondence provoked by articles on the subject, and from people I meet everyday teaching as adjuncts at two, three, even four colleges concurrently, the subject is alive and festering. Whereas chapter one, "Finding a Family, Finding a Voice," reflects the dominant, positive masterplot and one of the best classes I've ever taught, chapter ten, "Subverting the Academic Masterplot," reveals my worst class, enacting a plot so thoroughly negative from start to finish that there is no redemption, except possibly the Lessons About Teaching one can learn from these mistakes.

Part III treats some of the many aspects of *Creative Scholarship and Publication in Composition Studies*. Chapter eleven, "Coming of Age in the Field That Had No Name," offers a composition studies analysis of my doctoral dissertation on *How Literary Biographers Use Their Subjects' Works*—an attempt to determine two sets of composing processes, those of notable literary biographers and those of the creative writers who were their subjects. Written before composition studies had a label and a language, the dissertation nevertheless exemplifies many of the concerns and methods of the field as it has continued to emerge in the past quarter-century. Thus this chapter offers a microcosmic study of one researcher's methodology in
an emerging field. It also presents a way to re-examine a great deal of other work in composition studies done before the language emerged in which to talk about it.

Chapters eleven, “Coming of Age in the Field That Had No Name,” and thirteen, “I Write for Myself and Strangers: Private Diaries as Public Documents,” are included to promote an understanding of how the texts they discuss are written, reinforcing the commentary in chapters seven and nine. Chapter twelve addresses significant differences between amateur and professional writers. Professionals continually make choices that don’t occur to most amateur writers—about how much information and contextualization to provide, how to convey a particular authorial persona, what tone and vocabulary to use—in short, how to accommodate an external audience. My analysis is intended to demonstrate how teachers can enhance students’ understanding of the primary texts, improve their aesthetic sensibility, and create a climate for them to write comparable works.

I have deliberately chosen to include in Composition Studies as a Creative Art this chapter, originally published in Bunkers and Huff’s Critical Essays on Women’s Diaries; chapter five, “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre,” which recently appeared in Bishop and Ostrom’s Genre and Writing: Issues, Arguments, Alternatives, and chapter eleven, “Coming of Age,” originally written for Frey and Freedman’s book on The Autobiographical Nature of Research, Scholarship, and Knowledge Across the Disciplines, to emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of my own work, as of composition studies in general. With the world as our subject, we should be able to publish anywhere in the universe of discourse.

Chapter twelve “Anxious Writers in Context,” presents writing anxiety theory, applicable to the composing processes of all student writers and many writers outside the academy, anxious or not. I apply the theory to case studies of two anxious writers to show how a combination of contextual factors enabled one to finish her work and conspired against the work of the other. Chapter fourteen, “Making Essay Connections: Editing Readers for First-Year Writers,” analyzes issues involved in editing freshman composition Readers (“Don’t do it!” I conclude); and chapter fifteen, “The Importance of External Reviews in Composition Studies,” discusses the criteria, scope, and significance of external reviews of individual scholarship (for promotion, tenure) and of entire programs in composition studies.

Part IV, the concluding section, addresses ways to emphasize Writing Program Administration as a Creative Enterprise, and thereby to do it better and to make it fun, if not actually lovable. Every chapter attests to this.
In chapter seventeen, "Why I (Used to) Hate to Give Grades," I discuss a creative solution to the unavoidable necessity of having to give grades. Chapter eighteen, "Initiation Rites, Initiation Rights," and chapter nineteen, "Writing Program Administration as a Creative Process," address creative ways to serve as a writing program administrator. Chapter eighteen deals with ways to transform the initiation rites—institutional hazing calculated to depress, if not destroy, newcomers to administrative jobs—into constructive opportunities for changing—curricula, the institutional climate concerning writing, and with perseverance, even the culture. Chapter nineteen, "Making a Difference," focuses on how WPAs can train teachers, influence graduate and undergraduate education, and enhance the employing institution's reputation in composition studies. It is not by chance that the book's two satiric pieces, chapter sixteen, "I Want a Writing Director" and chapter twenty, "Bloom's Laws" ("WPAs don't think something is fun unless it requires three hundred . . . hours of community service") appear in the section on administration, for satire implies the possibility of reforming the current state in the direction of an ideal. Indeed, if I appear to be an idealist throughout this book, that is not by chance. If we as teachers, scholars, administrators do not believe that our work can make things better, then we are grounded in pessimism rather than hope, and we should either change our minds or our line of work.

BLURRED GENRES: THE STYLE OF THIS BOOK

It took an existential crisis—one that led to a life-altering decision—that let me begin, a decade ago, to write this book.

For twenty years prior to that time, as an academic scholar, my writing had reflected the conventions of academic prose that William H. Gass satirizes in "Emerson and the Essay": "An article . . . must appear complete and straightforward and footnoted and useful and certain and is very likely a veritable Michelin of misdirection; for the article pretends that everything is clear, that its argument is unassailable, that there are no soggy patches, no illicit inferences, no illegitimate connections; it furnishes seals of approval and underwriters' guarantees" (25). I wrote and published many such articles, invariably twenty double-spaced typescript pages, a-bristle with footnotes. I took pains to delete myself, even my passion for the subject at hand, from my work; to appear as a character in one's own writing would be unseemly, I thought. Yet in my heart I knew that my work, like my life—or anyone's, for that matter—was beset by doubts, fallibility, and the random chance and error that can undermine the best of intentions as
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well as of research. Whether anyone else was as vulnerable as I was impos-
sible to tell, for no one could admit such human frailty in academic jour-
nals, those bastions of certainty and shrill argument, as Olivia Frey argues
in “Beyond Literary Darwinism.” To get published, authors had to play
hardball according to guys’ rules which, as Gesa Kirsch anatomizes in
Women Writing (in) the Academy, are still operative in what for many
remains the only game in town.

I grew dissatisfied with this game. Like all rule-bound enterprises, the
artificial certainty of the argument and the effacement of the author dehu-
manized a messy process and made it too tidy. I wanted to acknowledge in
print that I was subject to the full range of the difficulties, as well as the
delights, of the human condition. I wanted to write about my work—
teaching, writing, scholarship, administration—as an identifiable person
rather than as a remote Authority. I wanted to write in a personal voice and
to set my work in a human context that included past history as well as the
issue of current concern. But I couldn’t begin to write as a person invested
in my subject as in life itself, rather than as a detached scholar, until I could
admit—in public and in writing—that my understanding of some things
was tentative, uncertain; that I had a lot to learn and a long way to go; that
I could make mistakes, great and small.

As I explain in chapter one, “Finding a Family, Finding a Voice,” the pre-
cipitating event was sudden and it was swift. My husband of (then) twenty-
ine years, his customary good health in rapid decline, was diagnosed as
suffering from a malignant brain tumor. The issue was not whether he
would die, but when. In that context, I wrote the first essay in which I dared
to use the vertical pronoun; coming out as a human being seemed a small
risk in comparison with the life-and-death battle being waged in our
household. By the time Martin had—astonishingly—recovered, I had
experienced the pleasure, and the power, of speaking in my own voice, and
of encouraging my students to do the same, and there was no turning back.

Later, one of my students, such an astute critic of others’ writing that I
asked him to read my own manuscript in progress, reinforced my decision
to incorporate human stories into academic writing with the sensible and
by that time only mildly frightening observation that, “You’re writing a lot
about autobiography as a critic,” he said, “but you’d reinforce the point
economically if you’d put in some of your own.” Again there has been no
turning back, but only a vision of writing to come as I have written the
autobiographical segments of my recent work. So I proffer this
Introduction to Composition Studies as a Creative Art as an apologia, not an
apology, full of delight at the opportunity to share with colleagues across
the country—teachers, students, administrators—this labor of a lifetime, a labor of love.

Make no mistake. Just because the writing throughout this book sounds personal does not mean that it is therefore by definition sloppy, sentimental, self-indulgent, or stupid—objections too often fired broadside against the living body of such work. In chapter seventeen, “Why I (Used to) Hate to Give Grades,” for example, every concept of assessment, learning theory, and pedagogy could have been buttressed by citations. But the literature is so well-known that I expected readers would be familiar with it, and if not, that their own experience would argue the merits of my case. I must confess that I also wanted to see whether a major journal would take it, unshod by footnotes, and that I chortled when CCC said “Yes”!

Nor does personal-sounding writing mean that the work at hand is particularly personal, any more than impersonal-sounding writing means that the author is not invested in the subject, as addressed in chapters four, five, and twelve. Both are ways of constructing texts; one way is not necessarily more honest, straightforward, or intelligent than the other. But both ways, because they are nonfiction, are expected to tell the truth, even if they tell it slant, for that expectation is the basis of the transaction between nonfiction writers and their readers, even allowing for some “stretchers,” as Mark Twain says.

In chapters seven, “Creative Nonfiction—Is There Any Other Kind?”, and nine, “Why Don’t We Write What We Teach?”, I take issue with the arguments of those who would annihilate human-sounding style; there is no need to reiterate the debate in this Introduction. But another seven years of experience in incorporating creative nonfiction into academic articles—the predominant technique in most of the chapters of this book—allows me to address a related matter: how hard it is to write this way. Every piece is an exercise in intellectual and aesthetic rigor, the antithesis of self-indulgence, as I explain in chapters four (“Textual Terror, Textual Power”), seven (“Creative Nonfiction”), and nine (“Why Don’t We . . .?”). In chapter five (“Telling Secrets, Telling Lies, Telling Lives”) the student authors amplify my own understanding of how such rigor is attained, even in a seemingly free-wheeling context.

Because my own writing process embeds E.M. Forster’s perennial question, “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?”, I have always rewritten a great deal in the course of coming to understand my subject and determining what I mean to say. Now that I’m combining academic storytelling and academic writing, I rewrite even more. Intellectually and emotionally, the telling of autobiographical stories is one way to make
sense of things that don’t make sense. Usually the meaning does not come all at once, but slowly, in bits and pieces. Moreover, unlike most academic critical writing which largely follows the form of a classical argument, every new piece that employs creative nonfiction, the playing of verbal jazz, requires the author to learn to write anew, in the course of resolving technical issues of persona, style, tone, dialogue, scene construction (see chapters four, five, seven, nine, twelve). Because each problem is new, each solution has to be new, invented—in the absence of predictable formula or format, after considerable trial and error. The leveling effect of this process means that I am on the same plane with my students, in every semester, every class—and happy to take off for the unexplored in their company.

For instance, it took fifteen years before I was willing to disinter the buried memories of my worst class ever, followed by two more years to write “Subverting the Academic Masterplot” (chapter ten)—sixteen major drafts, not counting innumerable tinkerings with particularly tough spots. A deadline, as Sam Johnson has observed of an impending hanging, wonderfully focuses the mind, and this paper lurched from one deadline to another—chunks, written and dramatically revised and revised again—for presentation at two CCCC meetings. The beginning, “Teachers’ Tales—The Masterplots,” was the easy part, because its substance depended on an analysis of the plots of the success stories of teachers we know and love, Mina Shaughnessy as a case in point, buttressed in my mind (though not in the paper) by the appealing figures of Nancie Atwell, Don Murray, Mike Rose. Then I got stuck, and although I had agreed to contribute the piece to Joe Trimmer’s volume on Narration as Knowledge, I kept writing page after page of analysis, punctuated by self-flagellating rhetorical questions, such as “How could I have imagined that conceptualizing a research design, and working out its nuances—which would require the students to have frequent and extended discussions with me—could be conducted in absentia?”

Yes, I wrote that sentence, and a lot more like it. I am fond of quoting to my students the observation of physicist Jerrold Zacharias, “If you can’t put it into English it means you don’t understand it yourself”; this truth came home with a vengeance. With every phrase I continued to sink into the verbal quicksand until straight talk from the friends to whom I sent it in desperation, critical readers among those acknowledged at the outset of this book, let me know that to tell the story I had to write it as a narrative, rather than as an academic treatise. I was still stuck. I hadn’t taken notes on that miserable class, I’d tried to forget it. In order to re-create the critical scenes, I decided to transform all the analysis into dialogue; it took a slow two
months to work up to the most scornful student's pivotal sentence, "You don't know what ethnography is?" Then the rest clicked into place. It's easy to see why Hemingway could say that he rewrote the ending to *Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times—"just getting the words right." And the music.

Half the book is spanking new. Eight chapters were published in 1997–98 (Chapters two, five, eight, ten, fourteen, fifteen, seventeen, nineteen) and two are not yet published elsewhere (chapters eleven and twenty). During the past seven years my own way of writing has changed dramatically, as has my understanding of the fluid field of composition studies and of the world in which we and our students make our hesitant way. This new understanding is reflected in extensively rewritten versions of chapters five and nine. I have suppressed an urge to rewrite other pieces—not because I no longer believe what I said, but for the sheer sake of shaking up the style, to see whether I could make anew what I had already made anew earlier. I have, however, updated the citations when to do so would not alter their use in the text; and I have eliminated some of the redundancies that arise from juxtaposing formerly free-standing articles in a single collection. If it were possible to do so, I would take out all the footnotes, either transforming their essence into text or discarding it. (And I would eliminate parenthetical remarks.) What you are reading in this Introduction has in various incarnations had a dozen footnotes, all deleted. Yet I have reached closure in this Introduction in exactly twenty typescript pages, same as always, a scholarly writer to the end.