Refiguring Prose Style

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AN ARTS-CENTRIC COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Gabriel Gomez

The Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca wrote about a Dionysian spirit of inspiration called duende, a cornerstone of his poetics: “The duende is a momentary burst of inspiration, the blush all that is truly alive.” He adds, “[B]efore reading poems aloud before many creatures, the first thing to do is evoke duende. That is the only way that everybody will immediately succeed at the hard task of understanding metaphor” (p. viii). Lorca argued that duende captivated the poet, musician, and dancer into an enlightened trance beyond the limitations of ordinary intelligence. Despite his unorthodox theory, Lorca understood the importance of engaging in a creative act such as a musical performance or writing in order to understand its connection and relevance to the outside world. As an English instructor, I have yet to encounter a similar theory of inspiration for students to write an effective argument, complete with a thought-provoking thesis, seamless transitions, and comprehensive conclusion.

Judging from the fact that U.S. federal support for all arts education in 1995, including music, was less than $21 million annually for K-12, while $193 million of taxpayer money was spent on ceremonial military bands, $25 million more than the entire budget of the National Endowments for the Arts (Gannon 1995), art—its creation, instruction, and relevance—has largely been consigned to the kiddy table. Ceremonial posturing exemplifies our cultural priorities for the arts. They are a symbolic and patronizing afterthought, like wearing commencement regalia during graduation.

Moreover, art’s intrinsic benefits in the classroom have been decidedly ignored, if not vanquished from academic discussions. As an undergraduate creative writing student, I read a passage in Richard Hugo’s book The Triggering Town that echoes in my teaching style: “Every moment, I am without wanting or trying to, telling you to write like me. But I hope you learn to write like you. In a sense, I hope I don’t teach you how to write but how to teach yourself how to write” (1979, 3). My methods for
teaching English composition have been founded on principles anchored to Hugo’s idea of self-guided pedagogy. Additionally, my interests in poetry, music, and ceramics have contributed to ideas on nurturing creativity and style in writing. I have found that by exposing students to visual and musical genres of art, I can supplement their understanding of the writing process in very productive ways.

I have designed lessons based on an arts-integrated curriculum established by the California Alliance of Art Education (CAAE), and my experience working as an arts and education coordinator for the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts (EBCPA) in Richmond, California. These art-oriented approaches to teaching are rooted in K-12 art and education programs, but they are designed with enough flexibility to apply to curricula. In fact, I have customized and currently use the CAAE framework as a component for teaching college-level English composition.

More specifically, a handbook of arts-integrated teaching methodologies entitled *Creative Collaboration: Teachers and Artists in the Classroom* (Lind and Lindsey 2003), recently published by the CAAE and the San Bernardino City Unified School District (SBUSD), has proven to be a useful resource in planning my arts-centric classroom strategies. The handbook, designed in consideration of the skill and knowledge standards for visual and performing arts set by the California State Board of Education, is geared for artist and teacher collaborations in the classroom and centers around five content strands: (1) artistic perception; (2) creative expression; (3) historical and cultural context; (4) aesthetic valuing; and (5) connections, relationships, and applications. The strands function as guidelines that are meant to be implemented as a group to ensure successful K-12 arts-integrated programming. I adapted the artistic perception, creative expression, and historical and cultural context strands into my lessons by concentrating on their fundamental artistic principles and using them to meet my curricular goals of developing students’ prose style and teaching them to examine ideas holistically. Meanwhile, aesthetic valuing, or the aesthetic critique of art, fits naturally into the majority of my integrated teaching methods, while connections, relationships, and applications outlines how a specific art form can supplement other areas of the curriculum; these fourth and fifth strands are entwined throughout the first three strands and inherently capture the spirit and value of my arts-integrated methodologies.

The lessons are designed as informal and supplemental writing exercises and are not meant to replace formal argumentative and persuasive
essays. I typically use these arts-integrated methods with fairly advanced English composition students who are familiar with the process of constructing essays but are not yet experienced or comfortable in formulating persuasive arguments. My reason for targeting advanced students is to focus primarily on ideas of style and content development. I focus more on the mechanics of writing with students in introductory levels of composition. The ultimate goals of my lessons are not to teach students to be creative or to measure their artistic ability. On the contrary, my goals are to teach students to be stylistically flexible and engaged in their writing and to prepare them for future academic courses by examining ideas in an artistic, cultural, and political context. In the spirit of Lorca’s theory of duende, I am trying to realize a connection between arts expression and writing by having my students analyze, critique, and create works of art. The following is a breakdown of the artistic perception, creative expression, and historical and cultural context strands with examples of my customized lessons.

Artistic perception engages students in perceiving and responding using the language specific to the respective arts discipline. Instruction is designed to develop the basic building blocks of the arts, including specific language, technical skills, and perceptual skills (Lind and Lindsey 2003, 13). The artistic perception strand has helped me to focus my lessons on language and how it is used to express particular ideas about specific subjects. It helps students build context around their subjects by analyzing multifaceted ideas.

During the first week of class, I introduce students to the writing process by using a replica of Alexander Calder’s mobile entitled *Horizontal Black and Red Sieve*. I have them observe the movable sculpture as its arched limbs of wire and colored shapes of angular metal change positions and overall character as the piece drifts seamlessly on its own kinetic energy. The mobile introduces infinite interpretations of itself as it subtly contorts into new shapes. I have each student write two ten-minute assessments of what the sculpture could possibly represent when not moving and what it could possibly represent in relation to their first assessment when it begins to move. Students, who do not know the name of the piece, cannot use the words sculpture, wire, color, shape, space, movement, line, or art in their assessment of the piece. I limit their vocabulary to encourage students to think independently and not depend on or be limited by technical terminology. This liberates the students to examine the sculpture from a variety of angles and encourages them to exchange
vague and abstract language for descriptive and concrete diction. The exercise allows the students to examine the sculpture from a variety of different perspectives while referring to its original shape. After the two assessments are composed, I have students read them aloud and compare their observations with the class.

Their assessments are usually influenced by their immediate environment and major current events. It’s interesting to note that students usually write brief, choppy sentences for their first ten-minute interpretations and then shift to longer narrative descriptions once the sculpture begins to move. Their longer descriptions have a tendency to assume more human or lifelike characteristics, while their primary assessments allude to concepts and abstract ideas. I’ve asked them why they feel compelled to write their interpretations in one particular way as opposed to any other way. The answers are typically, “How else are we supposed to talk about it without calling it what it is?” or “I don’t get it, so I wrote down what it reminded me of.” The exercise encourages them not to “get it” or not to feel zealously committed to one idea about a particular thing because the result will always limit their response and ultimate understanding of the topic.

I explain to them that similar to the sculpture itself, writing an argumentative essay should be a collection of ideas that occupy all aspects of a subject while remaining focused on the thesis. What’s more, an argument must evolve and shift to account for changes and movements that rise in the writer’s thinking while he or she works on the argument. Ultimately, the exercise sharpens their analytical skills and allows them to explore an idea from various points of view.

Another lesson that evolved from the artistic perception strand is an exercise I call the “Shape of Music.” The exercise targets the development of introductory paragraphs and background information. I begin the exercise with a somewhat breezy analogy. An introductory paragraph functions in the same way a boat slip functions on a riverbank. If one were to simply drop a boat into the water from a steep embankment it would probably damage if not capsize the vessel, but if the boat were gently slipped into the water it would be stable enough to float. I expand my example by playing Miles Davis’s composition “So What” from his album *Kind of Blue*. “So What” begins with a sinewy melody that slowly evolves around a bass and drum rhythm and a two-note trumpet and saxophone riff. I describe how each particular instrument, trumpet, drums, bass, saxophone, and piano, plays an integral and equal part in the composition
while supporting a lead instrument that plays above the others. Miles’s trumpet has its own personality, with room for structured and improvised playing.

Developing background information in the introductory paragraph works the same way. Examples, quotes, narratives, and personal observations introduce the theme of the essay. Each note that the musicians play adds texture and dimension to the entire piece. I ask them, “What part of this tune could be interpreted as the thesis statement?” The unanimous answer is usually the moment when the melody reaches a slight crescendo that’s punctuated with a cymbal crash and Davis’s trumpet begins to play above the other instruments. Ironically, “So What” helps students visualize an effective introductory paragraph through music.

Creative expression involves students in the creative process within an arts discipline, building upon the processes and skills learned within that art form (Lind and Lindsey 2003). In a lesson entitled “Lost in Translation,” I have my students imitate a selected piece of writing by Andrei Codrescu. Codrescu’s piece is entitled “San Francisco Noir” and is part of his monthly column in a local weekly newspaper devoted to arts and culture. The lesson allows students to write through the style of another writer while using their own words. The brief essay describes a trip to San Francisco and the old memories particular parts of the city evoke. Codrescu uses cultural references, “long ago when the hippies came here to find paradise”; location references, “Sutro Baths, Fulton Street, Golden Gate Park”; and heightened diction, “lugubrious,” “ephemera,” “taciturn” (Codrescu 2003). The objective of this lesson is to “translate” this essay into the student’s own words and closely examine a piece of prose with a very distinctive voice and style. They must paraphrase and imitate the content and syntax patterns.

We begin by analyzing the essay in class. We discuss the style and tone of the piece. I ask them about audience expectation. What kind of reader would read this and understand all of the references? As a nonnative English speaker himself, do you suppose Codrescu was targeting a specific audience? I ask them about content. Does this essay try to convince you of something? If so, can all of this information be stated in a different way without losing all the concrete details? I ask them about his writing style. What is it about his language that seems to make his ideas connect effortlessly? After our discussion, the students take the essay home and invariably spend time researching the city of San Francisco, names, dates, and authors that Codrescu writes about in order to make an informed
paraphrase. The students instinctively do one of two things: They replace details with vague references or use long-winded analogies. San Francisco becomes the “city” or the “northern California city throttled in fog,” the Sutro Baths become a “spa” or the “site for ritualistic bathing,” and the hippies become “unemployed drug users” or “trust-afarians,” (Codrescu 2003). We can then discuss their choices and in doing so students develop an increasingly subtle sensitivity to the dynamics between meaning and style.

Historical and cultural context allows the students to analyze the role of the arts in the past and present. This strand builds understanding of the contributions and cultural dimensions of each art discipline (Lind and Lindsey 2003). The basis of my lessons on historical and cultural context are founded on my experience as the art and public education coordinator for the East Bay Center for the Performing Arts, where I worked with professional artists and school teachers in K-12 classrooms. My job was to facilitate the integration of performing and visual arts into the standard elementary and middle school curriculum. The art forms that were represented were not typically Western art forms but rather folk and indigenous art such as Mexican music and dance, African drumming and dance, and Brazilian capoeira. Our target populations were public school students who were recent immigrants and refugees from Southeast Asia, Mexico, Central and South America and disenfranchised by educational, social, and emotional neglect. We recognized the importance of keeping their traditions alive by teaching and promoting art forms that represented their cultural backgrounds. The ultimate goal was to empower people by becoming active in the educational, economic, social, and political systems of their new communities.

This same sense of cultural relevance and community has influenced me greatly in my own transition from an administrator to an educator. At the EBCPA, I realized that artists and art forms normally associated with the traditional Western canon were forced upon students. Shakespeare, Picasso, and Mozart, although undoubtedly relevant, were alien to their immediate environments and experiences. I sensed that my students lacked a sense of urgency when it came to creating and understanding art. Their lives are filled with vapid television shows, sophomoric movies, and candy cane pop songs, and as a result their curiosity and observation of the world is often unproductive. I decided to design a lesson that incorporates language, form, and culture in an attempt to reinvigorate and perhaps ignite their interest in writing.
For a lesson called “Graffiti Poem,” I have students construct a poem using only words, phrases, and expression that are found in the form of graffiti. Graffiti is a fascinating and purposeful form of language. It’s a reflection of style, strength, expression, territory, and wit; in short, it’s a people’s philosophy, a public discourse, a found poetry. After a brief overview of the specific components of poetry used for the assignment, students are asked to create a poem that integrates a consistent narrative, tone, and syntax by only using graffiti. The words cannot be edited or replaced. The majority of graffiti poems I receive from my students reveal harsh and caustic language, but some students develop a sense of ownership and control of the language. Here is one example of a graffiti poem that succeeds in capturing the essence of the assignment:

Graffiti Messages

1 59 North,  
I Love Sherry  
1 59 North,  
Jesus will save you.  
1 59 North,  
Brian wuz here . . .

Business building bathroom,  
Fuck those boys who can’t tell one girl from another!  
Business building bathroom,  
Can I live without him?  
Business building bathroom,  
Stop writing on the walls!  
Business building bathroom,  
You are no better.

It’s the writing on the wall!

This poem followed a structure that reinforced two recurring images and shifted the pace of the poem by changing every other line. The assignment creates a volume of possible writing topics and writing exercises for students to explore. English instructors could develop essays that examine language and public discourse, the sociopolitical significance of graffiti, or graffiti as postmodern art. They could also write about ideas
of style and structure in graffiti. Transitions exercises, for example, could be a fundamental strength of this assignment. The relationships between words that are seemingly non sequiturs or disjointed to the overall meaning of the poem can be thoroughly compared to the transition of ideas in sentences and in paragraphs.

Aesthetic valuing engages students in critically assessing and making meaning from works of art. They build skill and demonstrate competence in analyzing works of art (Lind and Lindsey 2003). The aesthetic valuing strand embodies my arts-centric teaching rubric in a variety of ways. The purpose behind the exercises developed under this strand is to recognize, develop, and extrapolate meaning from a convergence of ideas and images. In a lesson called “Origin,” I use a photomontage by photographer Scott Mutter to discuss the meaning of independent and paired images. Mutter’s photomontages are composite pictures of objects that when joined together assume a new and more complex definition. Their readings may differ, but they are always eminently legible (Krause 1992).

The photograph I chose for the lesson presents a panoramic image inside an immense cathedral. The center aisle that leads toward the altar has been replaced by an image of a city boulevard that has been cropped to fit the dimensions of the cathedral. The reconfigured dimensions of the boulevard, complete with cars and pedestrians, produce a gripping and improbable illusion of paired images with vast interpretations.

The lesson is divided into three steps. I begin by having my students write a list of concrete details evident in the photograph. Next, I have them write a one-word description or “abstract” that attempts to capture the meaning of the literal image.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concrete</th>
<th>Abstract</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pews</td>
<td>Haven</td>
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<tr>
<td>Debris on the floor</td>
<td>Clamor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eagle emblazoned on wall</td>
<td>Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An alter</td>
<td>Beckoning</td>
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<tr>
<td>High-arched door</td>
<td>Petition</td>
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<td>Streetlights</td>
<td>Vision</td>
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<tr>
<td>Waterfalls</td>
<td>Purity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cars</td>
<td>Cold</td>
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<tr>
<td>City street</td>
<td>Evil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steps</td>
<td>Progress</td>
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<td>Flag</td>
<td>Communication</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The final step is a twenty-minute freewriting exercise that analyzes the photograph’s meaning. We begin this step by interpreting the intricacies of the photograph. I have them consider the significance of the cathedral and the boulevard independently and as part of the photomontage when the two images are spliced together. The writing prompt for the writing exercise is “How does the meaning of these two images change once they have been combined and why?” Here are two brief excerpts of student writing that attempt to answer this question.

The vitality suggested by the coupling of these two images (cathedral and city) is one of emergence—social emergence, which ultimately leads to spiritual emergence. I believe the superimposition that the artist manipulates stems from his/her own convictions of art/life/spirituality and their symbiotic implications.

The photograph shows two contrasts between bustling city life with chaotic inclinations and the peaceful ambiance of the cathedral. It compares the difference between technological progressions of the world of man to the absence of religion in contemporary societies.

These two examples are fairly sophisticated yet indicative of the typical responses to Mutter’s photomontage. This exercise helps the students analyze contrasting and multidimensional images by anchoring their attention on two things: the recognition of familiar images and the renegotiation of their meanings once they have been paired with unlikely partners. The familiarity of the spliced images in Mutter’s photomontage provides an accessible introduction for students to begin a successful analysis of meaning.

This lesson could be easily adapted and developed into longer reading or writing assignments. Students could explore the relationships between opposing ideas in argumentative essays by using the same steps I used to discuss the photomontage. For example, the concrete and abstract lists could be replaced with a pro and con list for essays that propose solutions; essays with extensive supporting material could be organized one supporting example at a time; refutation material could be developed and implemented into calculated steps throughout entire essays.

Instructors who use fiction as a tool for teaching composition can adapt this lesson to discuss the probability of meaning when analyzing short stories or novels. As part of a lesson on the components of fiction such as plot, characterization, point of view, setting, and so forth, students
can use the list or twenty-minute writing techniques to summarize the work of fiction into their own words. Furthermore, response papers that identify abstract themes in works of fiction such as struggle, identity, and freedom can be based on the concrete and abstract list steps of the lesson and help students explore the differences between literal and figurative language.

Connections, relationships, and applications content standards outline student expectations focused on what the students have learned in a specific art form and are then able to apply to other areas of the curriculum (Lind and Lindsey 2003). The final strand provides students with the opportunity to apply the skills they’ve developed through the arts-centric writing discussions and assignments in their first formal out-of-class essay. I usually assign an essay for students to read and respond to that is tangential to our discussions of arts-centric themes and concepts; it is usually an essay written by an artist that discusses the artist’s methodologies and ideologies of creating art and its connection to the world. However, I recently used Thomas Frank’s essay “Down and Out in the Red Zone” (2003), a commentary on his experience at Super Bowl XXXVI in New Orleans. His observations of the ravenous media, decadent pageantry, and gluttonous consumerism that surround the Super Bowl proved to be a meaningful backdrop for students to exercise their analyzing skills. I also wanted my students to translate their skills of analyzing art into analyzing argumentative essays.

I chose this particular essay because of its own criticism and exploration of meaning in a spectacle that is heroically complex, emotionally encumbered, and brazenly ceremonial. Frank’s search for meaning is built upon his observations of the frenzy that accompanies the Super Bowl in week-long pre-game rituals that surround the actual game. I felt that this essay would create a solid transition between engaging in arts-centric lessons and writing formal essays.

The challenge of this assignment was composing a direct and effective prompt that would guide students through the essay rather than prescribe a specific component to search for and reflect our previous arts-centric writing assignments and discussions. I decided to use the five strands as a framework for the question, but first I pared and altered the wording and description of each strand. The result was this question:

In his essay “Down and out in the Red Zone,” Thomas Frank describes the pre–Super Bowl events in his introductory paragraph:
Super Bowl XXXVI was to be played only five months after the catastrophic attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, four months after powdered anthrax appeared in the mail of prominent US senators, and mere weeks after the Enron bankruptcy. . . . The warm, safe old world was coming apart, but the greatest TV spectacle of them all would stand like Gibraltar, replenish our faith in our nation’s ability to sell itself beer, cars, chips, and all manner of online services. (2003, 3)

This excerpt exemplifies the tone of the essay. It’s a premeditation of ideas and thoughts to come. In many ways, the essay resembles a site-specific work of art in that the moment, location, and materials are central to the art’s meaning. The “zeitgeist” in the U.S. after the September 11th attacks embodied unity, patriotism, and strength. Super Bowl XXXVI, at least according to Thomas Frank, exemplified this spirit of the time.

Use the following topics as guide for a 500–700-word analytical paper on “Down and Out in the Red Zone.”

Perception: What is the author’s thesis? How does the author address particular ideas about specific subjects? Is there relevance to the order of examples?

Expression: Discuss the author’s use of style and overall structure in the essay.

Context: Elaborate on the historical context of this event. Does the author suggest particular importance to this yearly event?

Theme: What are the themes in this essay? Consumerism? Power? Patriotism? How does the author build and support these themes?

Connections: How are these themes relevant to the essay’s audience? Does the essay have a didactic purpose?

Conclusion: What is your overall assessment on the essay? Are the ideas presented in a clear and concise manner? Is the author overzealous? Misinformed?

The reaction to such a specific writing prompt is generally one of horror and anxiety. Nevertheless, the prompt is flexible. It’s important to remember that the arts-centric lessons are somewhat informal exercises that demand as much from the imagination as analytical skill. Their application and connection to writing formal essays, if done effectively, exercises both of these components simultaneously. For example, one student wrote, “In the sea of players, journalists, Hawaiian Tropics models and beauty queens, Frank met only one genuine human being. The Super Bowl was injected with patriotic vigor and pride, but even they could not exist in today’s vain, consumerist world.” Here the student comments on the contrast of illusion and reality by pairing concrete and
abstract examples from the essay. Her style is vibrant; her tone is ironic and direct. Another student identified one major theme in the essay and listed examples to substantiate his point: “Themes of consumerism ran rampant throughout the essay, including the Cadillac SUV’s and the gigantic yacht owned by Paul Allen.” A third student poignantly observes an almost existential stance of the essay: “Frank learns that nothing has changed about our society after September 11th despite the newfound unity in Americans; everything will always be centered on money.”

The original framers of the content strands meant for them to be “circular,” not “linear.” The strands, when implemented together, should overlap and supplement each other. I have been conscientious about this while adapting them to my classes. Again, the purpose of these exercises is not to train aspiring artists. The purpose of these lessons is to teach students how to write more effectively and clearly through an arts-centric rubric. These strands have helped me to guide students through the writing process in an open yet structured context. As a result, their formal argumentative and persuasive papers have assumed a richer texture of language and purposeful development of ideas.