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Gatekept: Inviting Creative Community Literacy

Shelly Sanders

University of Texas Arlington

B. Cole Bennett

Abilene Christian University

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Cover Page Footnote

Shelly Sanders, M.F.A. Emerson College, Ph.D. University of Texas Arlington, teaches at Abilene Christian University. Recent stories and poems of hers can be found in Aethlon and Windhover. As a recent participant of The Norman Mailer Writers Colony, she is always looking for another excuse to travel to the East Coast. mrw95v@acu.edu Cole Bennett is Associate Professor of Language and Literature and Writing Center Director at Abilene Christian University. His main areas of scholarly interest concern Rhetoric-Composition pedagogy, service-learning, and writing center studies. cole.bennett@acu.edu

Gatekept: Inviting Creative Community Literacy

Shelly Sanders and B. Cole Bennett

As instructor of the Community Writer's Workshop at Abilene Christian University, it's my duty to unlock the outer door to the library so that our workshop participants can enter the building on Saturday mornings. Our group gathers in the ACU Writing Center. The Center is usually closed at this time and normally reserved for student tutors to help peers develop better written arguments, fashion thesis sentences, find evidence from research, and learn how to cite sources properly. This group, however, is more interested in writing for themselves or for family, and throughout the free, six-week workshop, they never quite seem to believe that they're in the right place.

They don't all arrive at once, but when I reach the Library doors at 8:50, a couple of workshop participants are already waiting outside: the 16-year-old high school student, Miranda, and her mother, stamping their feet to keep warm on this blustery November morning, and Bob, the middle-aged campus police officer, who has a key himself but graciously waits for me to unlock the door. I love that I am a part of the hospitality of the Writing Center's mission with this endeavor, and this is one of my favorite parts of Saturdays in the fall. As I set up hot coffee and scones, and the early birds warm up, the other workshop members straggle in: the young mother and writer, Sara; Ed, who works at the State School but dreams of writing his memoirs; and Betty, the elderly retired teacher who writes stories for her grandchildren. A few others will arrive even later, but we don't care. If you can get here by 10 a.m., you're welcome. We're a diverse crowd, but we all find solace during these Saturday mornings, talking about and sharing our writing.

"I'm so glad y'all could make it today. Let's start off with a brief writing exercise," I say. "We're going to write a story using six words that we all agree on. First, give me three nouns...."

"Okay, Shelly. Hopscotch," says Betty, shrugging. I write it down.

"Watch, like on your wrist," says Miranda.

Someone else calls out "child," and then I ask for a verb and an adjective. In a few moments, we've got a list of random words, and before I can even say the word "go," the room is silent with scribbling. They've all contributed to this list and keep it in front of them. The stories they write from it, however, will be as different as their backgrounds. Even more than that, when we share them out loud, the writers almost interrupt each other to get the chance to read (though they all apologize for their stories at the beginning). The stories are funny and charming and interesting—one a fable about a pirate, one a long piece on the nature of grief, and another a short poem. A random list of words and a random collection of people gathered in a university writing center sharing stories . . . somehow, it all makes sense.

I watch Shelly welcome her writers to the small round tables in the Writing Center. I thought it important to be on hand this morning—just to make sure the workshop gets underway smoothly, that Shelly and her participants feel well-hosted, and that all have what they need to write. I arrange cups, creamer, and giant boxes of brewed coffee on the

front table, and I will go to Starbucks when things need to be replenished. As things get started, I direct latecomers and rearrange more furniture to accommodate them.

But this is not my gig; Shelly has conceived, designed, recruited for, and now implements a writing group for people who don't consider themselves writers. They perceive themselves as almost-writers, pseudo-authors, or creators-in-waiting. Now, *that* I recognize; I see those attitudes every day. The ACU Writing Center is exactly the place where these people should come. Normally, our clientele is made of students walking in with essays, literature reviews, reflections, syntheses, or reports. But not today.

This is an essay about combining passions toward a mutual end of creative critical literacy. Shelly and I are joining our interests and our efforts to serve a group of citizens—a community—in what we hope are complex, fruitful, and, ultimately, constructive ways. Our thesis is that creativity and critical thinking should not be separated, as they often are, and that deft use of campus resources can effectively rebuild the natural connections between these modes of thinking. Additionally, through such efforts, universities can serve populations often “kept out” of creative spheres and improve critical literacy in their communities.

Creation, Criticism, Collision

Douglas Hesse recently surveyed the current state of the pedagogical writing universe, building a case for the disciplines of composition and creative writing to tear down fences and share back yards. He doesn't merely want to improve relations in our departments, but he believes that creative expression and attention to style should count for something in a rhetorical situation, and, conversely, that we should care how writing affects an audience as people compose creatively. Hesse posits for consideration an aptly named “Elbovian Parlor”—a place where writers “gain the floor by creating interest through the arts of discourse” (41). Other scholars of writing have weighed in on the disciplinary relationships between creative writing and composition, or on the places of creative writing in English departments generally.

Notably, the January 2009 issue of *College English* is entirely devoted to analyzing the connections that exist (or don't) between creative writing and other fields. Gerald Graff writes that areas of convergence, such as creative writing and conventional literary study, are “avoided” because of assumptions that either we already agree, or because current discussions tend to be more divisive than fruitful (271). He writes, “Instead of discussing such questions, we pass the buck to the student, by instituting coverage requirements that essentially leave it up to them to connect what the department and the college cannot” (271-72). If students are successful in doing this on their own, great, but “connect(ing) the specialized functions” would require “that we not only talk to each other about the connections but actually work together in our teaching, as apparently we can't imagine” (272).

According to Graff, the “tense and uneasy relationship” that exists between creative writing and literature certainly can also be extended to the relationship that creative

writing often has with writing centers, and little evidence of curricular collaborations between these factions perhaps suggest “an opposition between creativity and criticism that lies deep in the roots of modern culture” (272, 274). Graff argues that the deep rift between the “unified, creative” Ancients and the “self-divided, hypercritical” Moderns spawned many other significant oppositions between the book-reading middle class and the more rarified academic critics and theorists (274). Because boundaries around creative writing and other fields then solidified, the tension between creative writing and other fields has limited students’ encounters in the academic arena. That tension has privatized creative writing programs such as the Iowa Writers’ Workshop that was originally founded to bridge scholarship and creativity. It has fractured literary and “ordinary” language (275).

Coming to terms with the conflict between creation and criticism is at the heart of the debate about why creative writing has always been a “gatekept” field. What can we in the academy do about it? While Shelly and I are not necessarily as interested in the problems that exist between creative writing and criticism, in this essay, we *are* interested the ways literary study and critical discourse in the academic community might not be limited to university students. How can creative writing be a part of non-academic programs or taught in unconventional spaces for learning?

These questions drove us to take action in the summer of 2008. Shelly wanted to offer a creative writing workshop for the community, but didn’t have a space to do it. I had a Writing Center whose mission included the community, but whose foot traffic often did not. We both wanted to talk about the larger contexts of the “gatekept” world of creative writing and the more “open” world of the university writing center to see how we might work together, sharing our strengths. Must there be a “bifurcation,” as Kimberly Andrews describes, an entrenched resistance between between creative writing programs and other types of writing programs—or must those who don’t have access to the university, to creative writing courses, simply flounder along, hoping the skills will be garnered in isolation? Andrews points to the creative writing workshop itself as the germ of this isolation:

The isolationist stance that pervades creative writing may have its origins in the history of literary history and criticism . . . but its perpetuation rests in the workshop. The workshop, the beating heart and running blood of any creative writing program, is a pedagogical structure that stands ‘over a hundred years old but basically unrevised’ (Bizarro 296). We must ask why this should be so. (247)

Of course, one of the major questions regarding this topic is whether or not creative writing itself can be taught at all, which is the focus of many articles on its future in our departments. However, this question may be secondary (and may even helpfully illuminate) an examination of “what constitutes the study and the practice of creative writing” (Andrews 250). Graduate writing programs may have their place, but how can students who do not have access to these classes still have access to a place in the academy or in the literary world? How might they have access to publishing, empowerment and confidence in order to hone their skills? What might be alternatives or spaces that provide new models for writing communities?

Andrews argues that we must pursue “hybridity” by having conversations among

various disciplines and programs (250). Through these conversations, we might find alternatives to bridging the creative writing divides. And hers is not the only voice echoing this sentiment, nor the only voice revisiting the sentiment of Joseph Moxley, who feels that the way to build the discipline of creative writing is to tear down walls in English Departments. Moreover, Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet address the idea of a writing community to bring attention to the complementary resources and new possibilities that are formed when writing programs and spaces are collapsed. Dawes and Friend are correct in viewing composition studies as an allied field . . . “that offers a fertile ground” (322).

While every writing community may not look the same, the writing community we describe below closely aligns with many of the rationales and procedures offered by Dawes and Friend in their model for the writing community. While their community was comprised of tuition-paying university students and differs from ours in scope, our writing community’s approach (which we call a Community Writers Workshop, open only to non-student residents in our community) mimics theirs in practice, in that it

attempts to maximize the strengths of each and minimize the weaknesses. It creates groups of writers with similar interests and uses group energy and skills to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Each community also includes a mentor to facilitate, advise, and where necessary, teach the group. (319)

The Community Writers Workshop

In the fall semesters of 2008 and 2010, the Community Writers’ Workshop transpired at ACU for six-week sessions. We used fliers and newspaper announcements to solicit applications from the community, each of which required a brief writing sample from the applicant. We received many responses from a wide array of citizens—from teenagers who were mostly interested in writing vampire novels to senior citizens writing memoirs and short stories. In fact, there were so many applicants during the first iteration that we held two workshops each Saturday, a decision we did not repeat the second time as we had a more reasonable number of applications. Writing Center employees answered questions and explained the workshop to parties who called or stopped by; they also collected applications and writing samples, routing them to Shelly for inspection and follow-up.

This is how the workshop operated: The Writing Center, not open for normal business on Saturday mornings, provided the suitable furnishings and environment for a writing workshop, including coffee and pastries. Although the facility is located in a Learning Commons space on campus, which is easy to find for visitors, it also has a more private back room, quietly sequestered from the goings-on of college student life. Shelly designed the event in a normal writing workshop fashion, with various participants assigned to bring multiple copies of their fiction or nonfiction each week, and others assigned to listen and provide feedback. The students also honed their craft and communication skills through fun, helpful exercises of all kinds, from starting with a given first sentence to writing a story in 10 sentences, each with a decreasing number of words. On the final Saturday, writers had the opportunity to read selections from their workshopped pieces for friends and family members.

Having a private room with an easily adaptable furniture arrangement provided a

space that mimicked a writer's workshop in a normal university setting. Yet it was clear that not being in an actual classroom provided some relief to participants. The Writing Center acted as a transitional space for them, and they began slowly to see themselves as writers. Additionally, they started to understand that the CWW, though a university-sponsored workshop, would listen, help and provide the space and tools to learn, no matter what age, background, socioeconomic status, career, or whether or not they had ever before stepped onto the university campus grounds.

Shelly approached this workshop as any other student workshop, calling the participants "students of life" or "students of writing." The first day, she explained what it means to be in a workshop, distributing a syllabus and describing the workshop's three parts: mini-lecture, short writing exercise, and workshop critique. Each workshop session is two hours long, and students are encouraged to attend each of the six Saturdays in order to gain the maximum benefit from the experience.

A productive tension comes out of offering a program that meets the writers "where they are," yet at the same time asks them, even from the first moment, to envision themselves as serious writers, on a college campus, taking a class from a university professor. We believe this productive tension, of being "in the world," and yet not entirely "of it," has been crucial for the program's success.

Yet Shelly found teaching in the workshop very different from teaching in her regular university classes, a pedagogical wrestling that has been both illuminating and disconcerting. In the Community Writer's Workshop, she focused more upon progress and confidence in writing than upon results, which, interestingly, aligns with writing center goals. Shelly channeled her pedagogy toward collaborating, fostering the creative process, and careful listening. The students often showed low self-esteem, and many expressed hesitancy at even being there. Shelly tried to allay their fears and create an atmosphere of hospitality, which is created by both the physical setting of the Writing Center and the structure of the workshop. Almost all of the students responded in an end-of-class survey to the sense of "ease" created in the workshop, noting that if they were nervous at the beginning, the *setting itself* made it a more successful experience. This seemed to be almost as important, if not more so, than the actual skills that they learned. A small group in a small place seemed to go a long way in overcoming the "gatekept" attitude.

In the workshop, Shelly's pedagogical method focused on writing exercises and short lectures to teach specific skills connected to voice, the writing process, and revision. Students experimented with varying voices for each piece of writing, and what was learned in the workshop helped them decide what voice they would use from multiple options. One of the most successful writing exercises required the students to take one story and tell it from the point of view of each person in the story. For example, in a story centering on a fight between a husband and wife over who would feed the dog, the husband, wife and even the dog would be called upon to tell his/her version of events. These suggestions proved helpful in changing entrenched writing habits and encouraged students to make thoughtful decisions about which perspective the writer spoke/wrote from. One student said this made him "work harder to flesh out the ideas."

Another lesson that made a lasting impression on students involved the power, importance and complexity of revision. As another student noted:

The most enduring thought is ‘revise, revise, revise.’ That’s been a difficult discipline for me to learn, especially if I’ve had other projects pending. On the other hand, I did find in our workshop notes the following admonition: *Watch out for self-critique leading to procrastination*. For some odd reason, I had an arrow pointing at the words and my own note: ‘make into a sign.’

Generally, hearing other people’s writing, getting to share and have some of their writing critiqued were listed as the most valuable experiences from the CWW.

Writing Center Mission

The mission of the ACU Writing Center reads, in part, “to provide an open teaching and learning environment for the collaborative discussion of writing so that people may become more critical and independent writers.” After outlining particular ways it supports the university writing curriculum, the mission goes on to say that we “offer assistance in all facets of the writing process to the entire community of Abilene, including area college and university students, working professionals, and the citizenry at large.” Cole had originally intended this language mostly to provide a welcome to the other universities in Abilene, and we do see some clients from that population, but we have rarely had people walk in with fiction, poetry, or screen-writing projects. When conceiving the Community Writers’ Workshop, Cole was as enthused by the prospect of expanding the Writing Center’s outreach as Shelly was with opening the fiction workshop to normally excluded writers. We both appreciated the motivation of the other to open a gate, but we each had our own places of professional fulfillment as the workshop unfolded.

Here, we would like to call attention to specific participant feedback to the workshops. What was really important for us to find out through these surveys was (1) what the strengths and limitations of the workshop were, through the eyes of the participants, and (2) how to better articulate the need for future workshops to those in the university and surrounding community. Our goal here is to summarize a few of the most interesting and insightful remarks that relate to the workshop’s function in the smaller community of writers and with the community at large.

On the final participants’ surveys, the students often remarked that part of the strength of the program is that it gave them the opportunity to connect with a community of writers in the Abilene area. These comments often illustrated that we were successful in overcoming the “gatekept” world of creative writing. In terms of how participants reacted to each other, two students said:

- I enjoyed learning that there are other aspiring writers in Abilene that have a passion for writing as well. This helps me to believe that great authors come from anywhere.
- I met a newspaper reporter, a high school student, a middle-aged college student, some writers and a geriatric historian—neat!

Other comments centered on how the participants interacted with each other:

- I enjoyed hearing comments of others about their own writing or mine.
- Everybody had something specific in mind, and it was all connected through writing.

These comments convince us that hierarchies did indeed collapse as Dawes and Friend put it, and that a new, hybrid space of learning opened up. Even after the workshop was over, productivity has continued. Shelly keeps in contact with students and encourages them to pursue their writing efforts. Since the last workshop in fall 2010, one student has landed several writing and photography opportunities on a newspaper, and another has even completed 82,000 words of his memoir.

One future goal will be to find ways to make these connections even more sustainable, to support writers beyond the six-week scope who might prefer isolation or have disabilities that shape their lifestyles. Several students hoped after attending the workshop that we might provide advice on getting their pieces published. We're hoping that we can develop new opportunities for growth and for partnerships between the English Department, the Writing Center, and other organizations.

Mitigating Boundaries

Our main goal in this essay was to argue that while university resources can ensure that some student writers enjoy an enriching experience in creative writing workshops, those resources are often limited and exclusive. Many potential creators of good writing cannot afford to get the "permission" a university course gives them to create such writing. They have never heard of creative writing workshops such as ours because so few exist. Moreover, their perception of such programs may be that they are not qualified participants—that such programs are designed for someone with a more valid "license" to write.

We want to overcome these perceptions. We have plans to continue and improve the CWW in semesters to come. For one thing, we are linking the CWW to university classes. Shelly will be revising undergraduate and graduate creating writing syllabi to incorporate a service learning component that includes the Community Writers Workshop. We plan for ACU students to mentor, facilitate, and learn from these workshops. With their participation, we can offer it at least once a semester. This summer, Shelly will research grants that provide funding and/or support for future workshops. We want to solidify the schedule of workshops, arrange for more reliable advertising, and bring in well-known guest speakers or workshop leaders.

We will also provide opportunities to publish participants' work. Like most liberal arts universities, ACU produces a literary magazine called *The Shinnery Review*. It publishes poetry, fiction, essays, and photography from contributors across campus. Under the guidance of faculty sponsors, a group of English majors solicits, vets, and edits this magazine, which is published annually, and whose audience includes current ACU students, alumni, visiting prospective students, and various others. We want to begin including selections from the CWW. Doing so would close the "publishing loop" for these participants, allowing them to see their hard work pay off in tangible ways that reinforce a sense of inclusion within the writing community. The placement of their pieces alongside

those of tuition-paying creative writers will salute the importance of all writing, within and outside the academic gates.

As Mary Ann Cain posits, the field of creative writing has the potential to make the academy a more public space that fosters “collective expression, deliberation and action” (232). Creative writing, as Cain, D. G. Myers, and Stanley Fish have all asserted, has always been more than just “big business.” While critics might point to the uselessness of the humanities in this regard, we’ve witnessed the challenge and potential power that creative writing generates in spaces for the community that might initially be seen as outside the parameters of the academy’s interests. As Cain states, “We can make room for other voices, other forms of expression and other viewpoints that the academic classroom might otherwise seem to disallow” (240). The community writer’s workshop at ACU seems to be a space that joins creative writers and writers in the academy in a way that is surprisingly useful, deliberate, and lived.



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