Writing Center Pedagogy

And Creative Writers

Creative writing is composed of many popular genres that, in many writing centers, are under-represented among the clientele. For many consultants this is a relief as many feel uncomfortable, or even worse unprepared, to work in this diverse, artistic, and complex field. Many consultants feel they don’t carry the background to adequately address creative issues, or they worry about impinging upon the ownership of a writer’s prose. This article seeks to shed some light on working with the creative genres and provide consultants with an effective way of thinking and talking about creative writing.

This article alone will not be able to address the various contexts and situations that will arise in creative writing consultations and thus there are no ready-made templates to follow, nor have we addressed the numerous contexts from which writers may come to the center. This article will focus around writers who are coming in with documents from creative writing courses and strategies with which consultants are already familiar and can adapt to help these writers work within the creative genres while maintaining artistic integrity. It is our hope that this will benefit consultants of all backgrounds.

Consultants first need to recognize that creative writing students are not coming into the writing center with the same background as students from most other disciplines. These creative writers and their writing have been through at least one workshop session. It is important that the consultant understands the functionality of a workshop before beginning a consultation.

In his article, “Research and Reflection in English Studies: The Special Case of Creative Writing”, Patrick Bizzaro explains creative writing workshops in this way, “creative-writing workshops offer a model of instruction over a hundred years old but basically unrevised. Teachers of creative writing, in the absence of any formal research on the effectiveness of the workshop, have long relied on what Steven North calls ‘lore’ to determine what they should do in instructing their students. Clearly, the lore of creative-writing instruction has it that writers should teach what they do when they write, employing the ‘workshop’ approach to teaching-based on a longstanding notion that the teacher is a ‘master’ who teaches ‘apprentices.’” (Bizzaro, 296). In workshops a writer’s work is peer reviewed by a number of non-professional writers. During a session the revision is focused around the reader’s needs, likes, and dislikes. Revisions are based on the reader’s ideas with little understanding paid to the writer’s process and goals; these suggestions may be considered or discarded at the writer’s preference. In addition,

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workshops tend to lack useful focus, often dealing with many issues in bits, or one issue, that is of little importance or help to the writer. This isn’t to say that workshops produce nothing of use for a writer. The reader’s viewpoint is very important to understanding where a creative piece is lacking; however, the workshop seldom aligns with the writer’s needs. Consultations need to be different. Consultants need to provide the writer a different focus from the workshop, which has most likely failed them in some way, and to address the needs workshops do not adequately fulfill.

In the writing center even the least “creative” consultant can help writers find their own strengths and weaknesses. Many consultants feel unprepared to work with creative genres because they lack experience in that area. As with any type of writing brought into the writing center, the burden of “expertise” rests with the client, not the consultant. The client needs to know the limits and capabilities of their genre. It is the consultant’s job to ask questions and help the client assess their writing against that genre. This is no different for a villanelle, a novella, a dramatic comedy script, a haiku, or any other creative piece.

Once the consultation begins, a clear destination should be set by the writer. It may be the case that the writer isn’t sure what they want to focus on because there were so many different suggestions made in the workshop. The consultant then needs to help the writer concentrate on his/her writing and what it is the writer wants to communicate. This is usually most easily accomplished by asking basic questions of the writer. These questions center on why they wrote a poem, instead of a story; what is accomplished; if they are happy with where the writing sits currently and why; or perhaps what needs to be addressed to make the ideas appear more clearly on the page.

After the writer establishes a direction in which to move the piece, the writing should be read aloud. From here it is impossible to say what the consultation will sound like because there are so many possibilities. Often, after the reading, the writer will ask “what do you think?” Don’t fall into that trap, they already have reader feedback! The next step is to ask questions of the writer. Talk to them about what they see. The consultant should ask questions that pull out the writer’s thoughts. These questions might be along the lines of: what the writer thinks this piece does well, or where in the piece the purpose is missing? Consultants should have the writer verbalize which sections are lacking. These questions are just a way to get the writer to think critically about his/her work and the received critiques. Once the “trouble” spots have been located the focus could shift to sections where the writer feels he/she has been successful and they could explore the differences between the two, or the consultant and the writer could engage in a conversation about the writer’s intentions for the section and then work through drafts to find something that works better.

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When we take a step back and consider this line of questioning, one might recognize that it plays out very much like a consultation with a student working on a perfectly ordinary research paper. In both cases the consultant is asking questions and relying on the assignment sheet and the student’s expertise in the genre. The student is also helping the consultant to understand the purpose and audience of the writing. As we might do with a research paper, in this scenario we have focused in on one area of the writing and discussed it with the writer, coaxing them to develop their line and depth of thinking, helping them to be an agent in their own revisions. These are skills that work across the board in writing center consultations and consultants should feel confident carrying them into creative writing consultations.

Any consultant can do this work effectively. Creative genres are not mysterious; they are no greater a challenge than a business memo, engineering paper, literature review, lab report or any other genre that consultants encounter daily. We may feel more comfortable with some genres, such as research papers, because as students we’ve almost all been assigned one. However, our understanding is not always what is in question; our goal is always to enhance the writer’s understanding. Helping students with creative writing is all about asking the right questions and helping the student to see their writing with new focus.

Works Cited


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