

CHAPTER 8.

USING CREATIVE NONFICTION
TO INFLUENCE STUDENT
DISPOSITIONS TOWARD
WRITING TRANSFER AND
DEVELOPMENT: PEDAGOGICAL
OPPORTUNITIES FOR WAC

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Years ago, when I sat in fiction workshops in my MFA program, I often asked myself a simple but important question: How does one learn to write literature? The creative writing workshops offered little in the way of actual writing instruction; instead, I would write, submit, and listen, twice each quarter, to the erudite critiques of my fellow MFA students. At that point, at least in my experience, the challenge of how to solve the various problems and shortcomings pointed out in critiques was mine alone. Some of my fellow MFA students appeared to have a feel for how to develop their writing under these conditions, and they thrived. However, for this writer, the structures and strictures of the graduate MFA workshop—that the writer must remain silent while their work is under free-ranging, personality-driven discussion; that the writer must sift through the mountains of feedback delivered primarily in written, formal critiques for which there was no instruction—left me with no sense of how to get better at discussing my peers' work, or writing critiques that would help them, and me, to improve in writing through such feedback. In many ways, my voice was silenced as I sat silently waiting for peers, many of whom had the same amount of experience as I did, to pass their judgment upon my work.

Felicia Rose Chavez (2021) has noted a racialized dimension to workshops that silence marginalized writers while favoring white voices and white writers; as a white man who attended an MFA workshop, I do not share the same experiences she narrates in her book, but I am sympathetic to its thesis and have felt, in my own way, as though I did not belong at the workshop table. I often felt out of step with the focus of the conversations—an assiduous rejection of context and a fastidious

attention to the text on the page. While this approach can bring many benefits, in my MFA workshops, the absence of context limited the kinds of comments we were able to make, and as a result, some voices became more prominent than others. For me, I felt that some outside context could help me evaluate a workshop draft and could even enrich the kind of strict textual reading and analysis preferred by so many workshops. It might have helped me better understand the themes of a text written from outside my privileged perspective. Instead, context and text analysis often were situated in opposition to one another. At the conclusion of a workshop, we had provided (or received) significant oral and written feedback. But what to do with it all—how to actually revise a workshop submission for the better—was opaque in the feedback. This was, as I understood, the writer's job to figure out. None of this made sense to me.

There are many creative writers who publish books on craft, ranging from the free-spirited approaches advocated by writers like Natalie Goldberg and Anne Lamott (heroes of my undergraduate years) to how-to textbooks by writers like Janet Burroway. When it came time for me to teach creative writing, first in graduate school and later at a transnational university in Egypt, I did not use either sort of text. I wanted to build a pedagogy that at least addressed my own past confusion; I also wanted students to have a tangible sense of themes and sentence types typical of the genre to guide their development as readers into creative writers. I came to understand by teaching creative nonfiction (CNF) in Egypt that students needed to learn and practice some of the different kinds of sentences that built traditional CNF essays: narrative, figurative, and reflective. Together, these sentence types could help undergraduate writers create CNF essays that focused on an individual's journey and that were told from a perspective of greater wisdom, which allowed for reflection that attaches significance to narrated events. In so doing, I adapted some of my composition pedagogies to the teaching of CNF by showing students how different types of sentences could be composed and orchestrated to accomplish the work of CNF writing.

My perspective changed, however, when I began my doctoral program, and I was introduced to literacy studies, which focused my attention on the social-cultural aspects of communication and which caused me to reflect upon the social-cultural aspects of the CNF writing produced by my students in Egypt. The focus on context and history was a counterpoint to the experiences I described in my MFA writing workshops. Because of this new training, I became aware that my cosmopolitan Egyptian students had been writing about topics, and expressing attitudes about these topics, that were not typically present in Egyptian public discourse: sex, alcohol use, terminal illness, endemic sexual harassment, poverty, religious uncertainty, and more. I realized that these particular students could address these topics in the personalized ways expected of them in CNF:

through narration and reflection from a vantage point of greater wisdom and maturity. This led me to see creative writing, and CNF in particular, as a form of western-based literacy with culturally-bound ideologies. I also had discovered that it could be taught and learned *in context*—Egyptian students in Egypt would utilize this literacy in context-specific ways.

Such an insight not only completed a long journey from my ponderous MFA student days but also initiated a new one: considering the unique ways in which CNF (and creative writing generally) is not so different from other literacies we learn in higher education. Such a realization might be anathema in the workshops of many graduate creative writing programs, yet it rang true for me. This understanding has brought opportunities for writing pedagogy relevant to both composition and WAC, which I discuss in this chapter. Given the personal nature of such writing and its cache with many students I have worked with through the years, I argue that CNF can be used in many kinds of writing courses to scaffold WAC, especially when we frame it as a form of literacy, with all the characterizing (and limiting) ideologies germane to literacy.

The questions driving this chapter are: How do we define CNF? What is the benefit of conceptualizing CNF as a form of literacy using a New Literacy Studies framework? How can CNF's unique qualities as a kind of literacy inform WAC pedagogies, particularly transfer and student attitudes toward literacy learning? What opportunities and challenges are presented through teaching western-based CNF literacies in non-western contexts, especially as they pertain to WAC?

I respond to these questions, first by defining CNF through the lens of literacy studies and then present new approaches for using CNF to achieve WAC-based goals. I reflect on my own teaching to suggest connections between CNF, composition, and WAC. Next, I describe a pedagogy that employs CNF to encourage students to see the value in transfer. Following that, I reflect on my use of CNF in basic writing courses to scaffold student understanding of sentence types used in CNF and, eventually, academic writing. This supports their writing development in academic and CNF genres. Finally, I consider how CNF, when deployed in other global regions with attitudes about public discourse and critical engagement different from that of the west reveals great potential as a dynamic pedagogical tool appropriate for WAC. In my conclusion, I consider how these approaches may be used in WAC to support student writing development moving forward.

DEFINING & CONCEPTUALIZING CREATIVE NONFICTION THROUGH THE LENS OF LITERACY STUDIES

New Literacy Studies, as an interdisciplinary field, ranges from education studies to the social sciences to English studies. As Brian Street (2003) writes, an

“ideological” perspective sees literacy as “a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill [...] rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being [...] embedded in social practices, such [that] the effects of learning that particular literacy will be dependent on those particular contexts” (p. 78). This definition is a useful way to reframe CNF and clarify what makes it a social practice based in western conceptualizations of identity and insight. For example, Robert Root, Michael J. Steinberg, and Sonya Huber (2005) describe the common elements of CNF as that of a writer making subjective statements about reality with a focus on self-discovery and self-exploration through a use of literary techniques. Philip Lopate (1995) writes that the personal essay seeks connections between individual experience and universal connection using tonal intimacy, sincerity, candor, honesty, and, importantly, “a certain unity to human experience” (p. xxiii). Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola (2004) add in their introduction to *Tell It Slant* that CNF involves “a close, if not intimate, relationship with the reader, a relationship that demands honesty” (p. 3). Chavez (2020), meanwhile, argues that white voices are given special preference in the canon, in the stories created within writing programs, and even in the power structures that hierarchize the creative writing classroom. She suggests, among other things, realigning traditional power structures and creating a “living archive” of writing by writers from many backgrounds to create and maintain a space where many writers can thrive.

These epistemological principles are based in a western-focused paradigm of individual expression and experiential self-discovery, revealing CNF as a particularly potent, and personalized, form of western-based literacy. The aforementioned principles underlying this form of literacy illustrate CNF’s unique qualities, for the writer is using a genre (e.g., memoir, the personal essay, literary journalism) to tell a story. Yet the stories are not simply expressivist, or private communications like diaries. They are public genres that utilize literary devices in telling the story. The writing and its purpose are held to generic standards just like any kind of literacy. CNF literacy has unique qualities that connect it to literature; however, it relies on socially agreed-upon standards to express stories that are deeply personal and often autobiographical. Additionally, as Nicholas Edmund Novosel (2018) notes several times in his dissertation study, CNF literacy employs reflection to help the writer deliver insight and commentary, a practice which Novosel claims (and which I will later expound upon) has a connection to composition pedagogies that use metacognition.

TRANSFER & DISPOSITIONS: CONNECTING CNF TO WAC

Through teaching, I encourage students to develop discursive practices that can exist usefully beyond first-year writing and, therefore, to gain meta-abilities that

can weather the switch from composition to disciplinary writing. Developing approaches to writing transfer has been an ongoing challenge. Mike Palmquist (2020) pointed out that much of WAC focuses on writing in the disciplines (WID) and writing to learn (WTL), noting that WID focuses on higher-order concerns in disciplinary writing, while WTL focuses on lower-order disciplinary concerns. The result: a gap within WAC that Palmquist believes can be addressed through writing to engage. For me, his articulation of the different levels of WAC also reveals opportunities to consider relationships between WAC and first-year writing that involve both transfer and student dispositions—*valuing* transfer as a form of engagement. I suggest that writing to engage should begin in first-year writing and can be taken up through engagement initiatives in WAC.

The promise and problems of transfer have bedeviled others through the years. Lucille Parkinson McCarthy (1987) in her study of classroom contexts noted that

as students go from one classroom to another they must play a wide range of games, the rules for which [...] include many conventions and presuppositions that are not explicitly articulated [...] writing in college is viewed as a process of assessing and adapting to the requirements in unfamiliar academic settings. (p. 234)

J. Paul Johnson and Ethan Krase (2012) in their mixed-methods study noted that students are rarely engaged in first-year composition (FYC) to WID transfer, despite sometimes utilizing adapted forms of peer review in their WID courses. They note that when students “perceive FYC as a trial space for learning discursive strategies, they can then later adapt these practices to the demands of upper-division courses” (p. 8). To that end, John H. Whicker (2022) found that students who engaged in writing about writing (WaW) activities in FYC developed meta-knowledge useful for successful transfer into WAC and beyond.

Other scholars have identified student dispositions or attitudes as a key factor influencing transfer from FYC into other domains of college literacy development. Elizabeth Wardle (2007), in her longitudinal study of seven first-year writing students, claimed that the students “did not perceive a need to adopt or adapt most of the writing behaviors they used in FYC for other courses” (p. 76), even when they clearly could benefit from doing so. Wardle focused on problems with writing assignments and suggests ways for these assignments to be engaging, inductive, inclusive of student interests, and more (pp. 77–78)—recommendations that reflect many of the priorities of this chapter. Ryan T. Roderick (2019) noted writing transfer scholars have discovered that “knowledge about writing is not enough to fully explain how some writers succeed and others fail to adapt to new or unfamiliar situations” (p. 412). He further questions the effectiveness of transfer-based

approaches to help students adapt to unfamiliar writing situations. Indeed, rhetorical, genre, and writing knowledge, as well as understanding that transfer *can* benefit one's writing, is not enough to *assure* transfer.

I maintain that writing students and instructors must *value* transfer, and that writing instructors can help students recognize transfer and value it from one kind of writing context to another. I argue that CNF offers an effective way to use curricular interventions to engage learning through the insight students gain from reflecting on their learning experiences, which can in turn encourage students to recognize principles in writing development that can transfer to other kinds of writing situations.

To illustrate, I adopt an approach to dispositions developed by Dana Lynn Driscoll and Jennifer Wells (2012), who argue that dispositions influence “students’ sensitivity toward and willingness to engage in transfer” and can be positive or negative, context-specific, or generalized. Significantly, these scholars ask the following questions pertinent to my own:

- What is the role of curricular interventions in shifting dispositions?
- Can we teach students in a way that encourages transfer-oriented and generative dispositions? (Driscoll & Wells, 2012)

CNF represents a potentially powerful tool for a WAC-based pedagogy in response to these questions. Novosel (2018) argues that CNF’s focus on reflection can be used to develop a pedagogy encouraging metacognition in academic writing. I add that CNF is a form of literacy at once disciplined and personal that can be used by WAC practitioners to help students learn the elements of not just CNF but academic writing and narrate and reflect key experiences that can assist with social belonging and inculcation into academic disciplines.

In any discipline, the ability to reflect upon one’s writing process and to develop the meta-knowledge necessary to increase ability and self-efficacy is critical. As we will see below, the types of sentences present in CNF can be used to help students narrate their writing and thinking, develop metaphors that can suggest new ways of thinking about writing, and comment on what matters most or what has proven to be most valuable or enduring in their work. This, in turn, can deepen students’ meta-knowledge, an important aspect of writing development from the first year into the disciplines.

REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING

PRAXIS IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING WITH RELEVANCE TO WAC

When teaching composition courses at Central Connecticut State University, I often include “Coming into Language” by Jimmy Santiago Baca (2014) early

in the class. The text is an effective and relevant example of CNF by a person who learns to read and write against great odds. In my basic writing classes, I use Baca's piece in two ways: to engage students in thinking about telling a personal story while also showing them how Baca uses different sentence types/segments to accomplish his goals. The types I point out to students are narration, figurative language, and reflection. I want students to recognize that writing is a creative and generative act and I want to engage them on a personal level. There is no better literacy for this than CNF, in my view, and Baca's evocative piece has proven an especially effective example.

After students read Baca, I introduce a worksheet based on the essay that underscores the sentence types I wish to emphasize in a paragraph. I point out the color-coded sentence types: blue represents narration, yellow is for figurative language, and green is for reflection. This illustrates the different types of sentences used to accomplish different tasks expected of CNF literacies. It also shows that a writer is thinking differently throughout an essay, using sentence types to orchestrate the completion of a writing task that asks the writer to think and process information in multiple ways. For example, Baca's piece narrates his journey to literacy learning in prison; students see how he builds the story in chronological order, and how he skips past entire years and focuses an entire paragraph on single moment. They observe his use of florid metaphors to help emphasize his state of mind; they also see his insight and commentary when he brings mature perspectives to events that were exciting and life changing. This work manifests in his essay through different kinds of sentences. Then I invite students to identify sentences from another paragraph that has yet to be coded. I read each sentence out loud and elicit responses from the class.

I teach Baca in this way not because I am trying to turn students into nonfiction writers but because I want them to understand and identify the kinds of sentences that can accomplish different goals according to the expectations of a genre and the ways a writer will need to communicate to meet those goals. I find that students in basic writing can be unfamiliar with what different sentences accomplish individually, much less how they work together in paragraphs and essays. Using CNF, and Baca in particular, is an effective way to encourage them to approach writing in this way. This sets up transfer into academic writing assignments later in the course, especially when we examine different academic paragraphs (introduction, body, conclusion) and identify how different sentence types are used to help build those paragraphs. By starting with CNF, I have witnessed enhanced student engagement with the concept of sentence types and can more readily transfer that knowledge to other genres with different sentence types.

Pedagogically speaking, this is a straightforward activity that draws upon students' engagement with Baca's nonfiction piece to introduce them to the general

concept of sentence types. This is useful in first-year writing; however, this activity would seem especially useful for WAC, in that it uses engaged reading to pivot students toward a cross-curricular concept without asking students to sacrifice their enjoyment of CNF.

This exercise on Baca's work often precedes an assignment wherein students write a narrative that spans three generations of their family—an adapted version of Ray McDermott's (2004) cross-generational narrative. The generational narrative also tends to deepen students' appreciation for the literacy experiences of prior generations, which brings stories of immigration, language challenges, and upward mobility through education. In this respect, the assignment helps place the students in a familial literacy context that focuses on the successes, challenges, and agendas for literacy learning and education. I have adapted this approach for upper-division courses as well and find that students value understanding family agendas that connect their interests to the people and places that helped bring them into a university classroom. While this may not seem like a strict "applied" form of WAC, I think it is important to use narrative writing, and models of this genre, to encourage students to connect themselves and their backgrounds to their academic interests, goals, and agendas.

Finally, students in basic writing write brief, quarterly journals focused on aspects of metacognition, ranging from describing to evaluating their writing process on specific assignments. By narrating their writing experiences, students can begin to gain some of the metacognitive knowledge so critical to their developing writing processes. Asking students to "narrate" their metacognition is significant, or it keeps with the narrative focus of aspects of the class and introduces an approach to metacognition that can be adapted across the curriculum—telling the story of their own writing development.

EXPANDING INTERNATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

As a form of literacy, CNF is culturally bound and tends to express western-based values through its epistemology. Not all cultures would support public writing that challenges, for example, familial and cultural norms. Likewise, concepts like self-discovery and self-exploration are important western values, particularly American values, and they may not always be accepted in other parts of the world. Likewise, the epistemological statement by Lopate (1995) that CNF "presupposes a certain unity to human experience" (p. xxiii) tends to ignore the western bias of CNF. Indeed, CNF exists within certain cultural-geographic spaces, despite claims of universal applicability.

Still, many writing studies scholars who study the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) note keen student interest in western-based creative literacies, either in

class or through literacy events like poetry readings. Lynne Ronesi (2017) writes about the enthusiastic response to a spoken word poetry event at the American University of Sharjah, while Amanda Fields and Melanie Carter (2015) explore the political-expressivist usage of selfies for a classroom assignment. Lisa R. Arnold et al. (2017) describe a transnational partnership between students in Michigan and Beirut that involved peer interviews among students in a project that includes reflective writing and analysis of literacy narratives. These studies discovered an interest in creative literacies among MENA students and began to consider how these students as novice practitioners may adapt creative literacies to explore priorities of their own.

Jonathan Alexander's (2018) focus on the "active nature" of literacy learning underscores that students are the shapers of literacy learning, not simply passive vessels, and CNF is a particularly apt example of such. When teaching CNF at a transnational university in Egypt, my MENA students were comfortable using a so-called western-based literacy like CNF to explore topics that were not typically addressed in public discourse, thereby revealing how CNF, or any form of literacy, is shaped more by those who use it than cultural or geographic points of origin. Indeed, Emily Golson and Lammert Holdijk (2012) from the American University in Cairo (AUC) found that CNF "tapped into a hidden need for attention to creative expression" (p. 185) among AUC students. While conducting IRB-approved research during my doctoral study following my 2010 return from Egypt, I interviewed a CNF teacher in Egypt who shared a story about a student's personal essay on his atheistic beliefs. Initially concerned that she was going to have to "protect" the student from critique by his Muslim and Coptic Christian classmates, some of whom were devout, she observed instead the seriousness and curiosity of these students during discussion, which focused on the merits of the writing and the often-unacknowledged presence of religious doubt.

To the instructor, this experience indicated that these young Egyptians were eager for opportunities to acknowledge and discuss complex religious, ideological, and cultural dilemmas not always addressed publicly in Egyptian society. In the small public venue of a CNF workshop, it was brave of the student to write about atheism in a region where atheism is not readily accepted in public society. This student writer had started a conversation about Egypt and was not simply perpetuating western values through CNF. This so-called western literacy was redirected by a young Egyptian to reflect their interests and needs. This is a critical example of the unique possibilities presented by CNF as it touches on the disciplined and the personal. The western boundness of literacy is not deterministic, for in the hands of an Egyptian writer, topics and attitudes germane to the nation found a public outlet. This example also reveals potential in developing student attitudes toward writing transfer.

To illustrate, upon reflecting on my own CNF teaching in Egypt, I recall many students wrote stirring CNF accounts on diverse topics: parental illness and cultural stigma, the fallout within a friend group when one of them came out as gay, endemic sexual harassment, and, notably, the cultural dissonance of visiting Mecca followed by socially permissive housing compounds that allowed smoking, alcohol, and bikinis. These topics and the reflections students had on their experiences seemed to have few, if any, public outlets in Egypt. The student writers used western-based CNF literacy as a launching point to address the desire for public discourse in a culture that often prefers to acquiesce to cultural norms. The characteristics of CNF—the narrative aspects, the personal story, the public audience—reveal how this form of literacy offers students the tools to explore topics and assume critical stances in unique ways. Not only is this beneficial in a course specifically designed to improve upon a student’s CNF literacy abilities, such as a creative writing course, but CNF writing has the potential to connect one’s personal interests, motives, and critical commentary to the wider contexts that incorporate academic disciplines.

Narrating personal experiences along with academic topics can improve critical engagement, and though no known studies have investigated this type of engagement (yet), I posit that the cognitive and social processes of writing CNF are different from academic writing. This difference, therefore, can allow students to approach their academic interests, developing disciplinary identities and writing processes, in novel ways. These “meshed” literacies, both academic and CNF, may also reconfigure students’ understanding of how disciplines articulate and respond to exigencies and can alter their motivations to pursue academic literacies. Likewise, it can set the stage for post-graduation writing, for, as Alexander et al. (2020) note in their introduction of the concept of “wayfinding,” writing beyond school involves recalibrations of “anticipated knowledge” imported from college writing, often influenced by growing knowledge of how writing situations and genres “intertwine” in ways not typically addressed in higher education writing curriculum (p. 123).

Thus, CNF with its unique characteristics offers dynamic possibilities for student writing development in social, cognitive, and motivational ways. Allowing students to write or integrate aspects of CNF can cultivate the expansive possibilities of personal engagement within the context of a disciplined form of literacy, to accelerate and potentially alter disciplinary genres and the ethos of developing writers. It is also possible that CNF approaches can lead to genre innovation in the form of blending: narrative openings to standard disciplinary genres or new “researcher narrative” genres that establish the motivation and genesis behind research projects.

CONCLUSION

I conclude this chapter by reflecting upon my experiences using CNF to scaffold academic literacy development from basic writing to creative writing. This kind of writing has deepened student writers' understanding of family literacy and educational agendas while also scaffolding academic reading and writing development, thereby creating possibilities for academic genre innovation. I have found that student writers tend to be more amenable to transfer, writing development, and deep engagement and reflection when CNF is incorporated into the curriculum. CNF's themes, approaches, motives, and sentence types can deepen student engagement with learning the basics of academic paragraphs, reflecting on family literacy narratives, considering the value in transferring from one genre of writing to another, engaging topics and expressing views that may elude traditional social-cultural constraints, and reflecting upon inculcation into disciplinary episteme in dynamic ways. There is much experimentation, research, and reporting yet to come among WAC teachers and administrators around the globe that could include CNF to explore writing in multiple disciplines across the curriculum.

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