

# Counter-Narratives and Learning

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## Introduction

Read Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Learn the traditional narrative arc. Stay quiet during your workshop. For many years now, university Creative Writing teachers have strived to incorporate meaningful counter-narratives that challenge the rigid structures that dominate Creative Writing as a discipline. What happens if Creative Writing students read talented authors outside of the traditional group of “Masters”? Can (and should) students learn how to write stories that don't follow the traditional narrative arc? What if peer review workshops allowed a writer to respond and interact rather than stay quiet and “absorb”?

I grew interested in these questions from my experiences at the AWP (Association of Writers and Writing Professionals) Conference, where CW faculty regularly discuss innovation in their courses that challenge these dominant narratives. In my own CW course, I implement counter-narratives with the intent of broadening my students' understanding of Creative Writing as a discipline. But there is little research on the impact of counter-narratives on students' learning and retention. The goal of my own research is to answer a very crucial question:

**How does implementing counter-narratives into a Creative Writing Course impact student learning?**

## Abstract

Counter-Narratives can be a powerful pedagogical tool, most importantly in the university setting. Syed and McLean (2021) identify an important framework of Master Narratives: they are both rigid and dynamic because they can be changed--both by those in power and those who are marginalized. I wanted to approach this in my Creative Writing classroom by examining how counter-narratives enhance students' understanding of the creative writing process. I implemented more diverse assigned readings, an exploration of different cultures' approaches to storytelling, and empowering students to redesign the peer review process. To assess my implementation, I developed a first-day self-assessment that asked students to identify and think about their readings from K-12 based on prior research from Carnegie Mellon and Cornell University. I also developed an end-of-semester self-assessment that challenged students to think about whether counter-narratives enhanced their learning.

## Innovations in the Course

Innovation is focused on three areas:

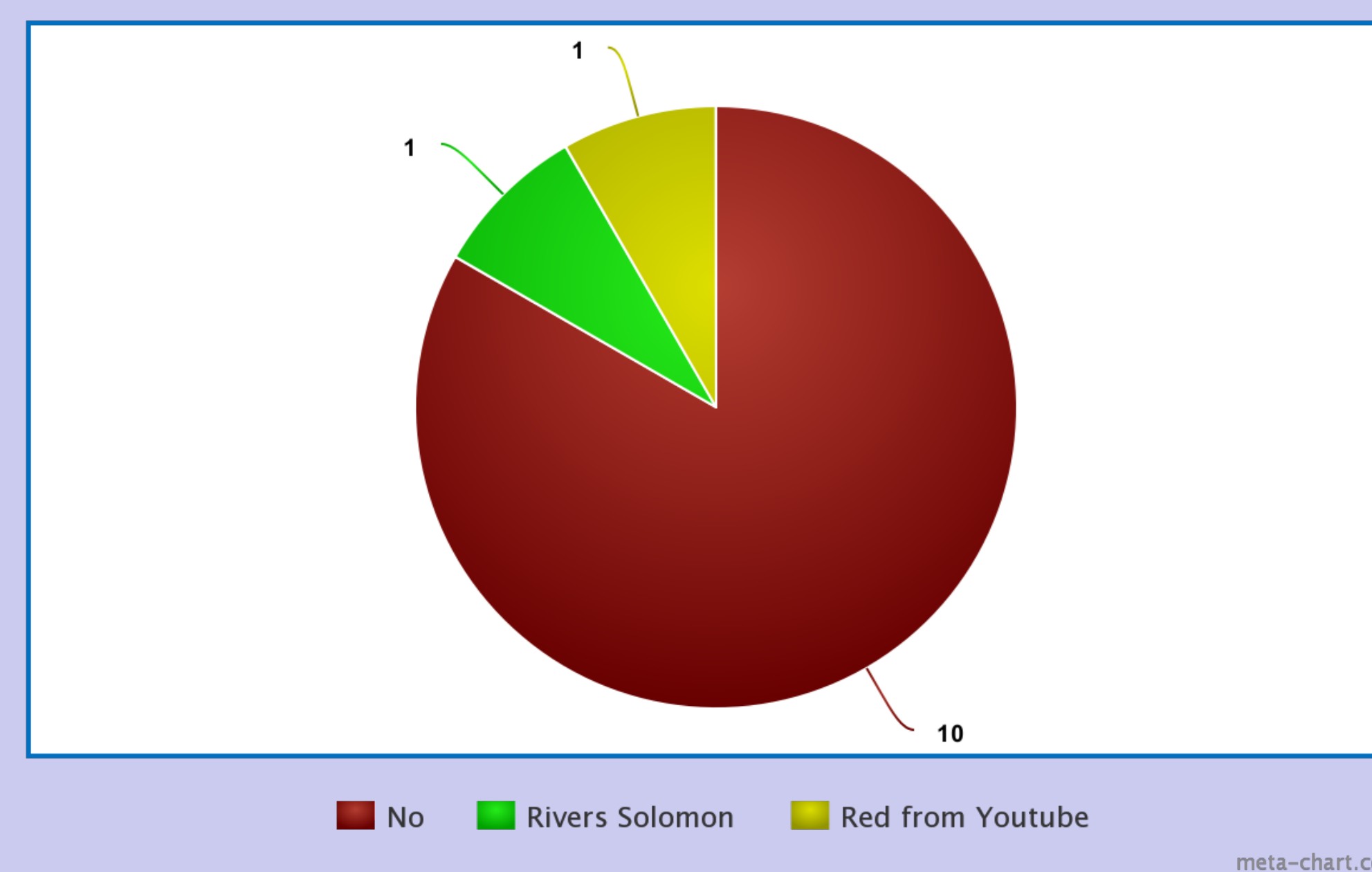
1. **Teaching a diverse selection of authors.** Rather than read the conventional “Masters” (Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Salinger), students are exposed to a wider variety of writing. Authors like Ted Chiang, Marjane Satrapi, Steven Graham Jones, Amal El-Mohtar, and Suzan Lori-Parks. Students learn to read as writers.
2. **Teaching a variety of story structures.** Rather than focus solely on the traditional narrative arc used in Western canon, students learn about a variety of storytelling techniques. This includes the 5-Act structure, puppetry, song-as-story, widow narratives, Bollywood, and Crick Crack.
3. **Incorporating a “decolonized” Workshop model.** Peer review workshops are valuable places in which a writer can get feedback from the entire class. But conventional CW workshops employ an outdated model in which the student whose work is being reviewed is expected to **be silent and never engage with peers**. My innovated workshops allow the writer to set the stakes and engage however they see fit. This puts the writer in control of their workshop and prioritizes their place in the process.

## Sample Answers from the First-Day Self-Assessment

**Question 2: When you hear the word “Literature,” what books come to mind?**



**Question 5: Can you name any LGBTQ+ authors you've either read or heard about?**



## Conclusion

I was surprised, initially, by the limited impact of literature on students in their time in the K-12 system. But in the end-of-semester self-assessment, I saw evidence that students were capable of identifying specific readings that impacted them as writers. They also mentioned specific authors who they planned to continue reading. Some students also mentioned how their concept of “storytelling” has expanded, using examples that we discussed in class. The most telling part of the research, so far, has been the impact of a decolonized workshop setting. Students unanimously approved of the format, which allows them to have control over the process.

Currently, my spring semester Creative Writing course has 18 students enrolled, and they have all taken the first-day self-assessment. I've refined my curriculum this semester to introduce a wider variety of authors and writing styles, and will continue to implement the revised Peer Review Workshop model. Going forward, I intend to enlist more Creative Writing faculty so that we may gather more responses.

## Sample Answers from the End-of-Semester Self-Assessment

In the course of the semester, can you name a specific writer/author that has had an impact on your writing?



Here's the definition of a counter-narrative in the context of a creative writing course: The telling of a story or expression of an idea/thought/feeling through the lens of a historically oppressed or marginalized writer. Based on this definition, can you identify any counter-narratives we've discussed in class over the semester?



(Most popular response: Persepolis, by Marjane Satrapi)

**9 out of 9 students felt positively about their workshop experiences. One student, for example, stated:**

“The workshop experience was nice, it was fun getting a chance to read others stories and see their writing styles compared to your own. Because we could set what we wanted it was not as intimidating as there was some control to the process. I did apply some of the corrections and while discussing my story it gave me ideas for later on that would be really unique and help character and story development.”

## Reflection

Creative Writing courses have undergone a massive shift in the past decade, emphasizing more inclusivity and openness to counter-narratives. In developing this research project, I became more interested in implementing those counter-narratives in a meaningful way. The surveys represent an opportunity to more carefully examine how these counter-narratives affect student learning. I'm happy with the data these surveys collect, however I can't discount the tremendous experiences in the classroom this past year: seeing students talk a length about a Bollywood movie, or arguing about a science fiction story written by a Chinese-American author, or discussing the Iranian Revolution as it's depicted in a graphic novel. These moments built community in the classroom, and translated to the Workshop experience, where students provided each other with feedback and encouragement that culminated in intense discussions about craft.

## Acknowledgements

I want to thank the Wisconsin Teaching Fellows and Scholars program for the assistance and mentorship. I also want to personally thank Heather Pelzel and Valerie Barske for their hard work facilitating this program. This research was approved by the UW-Whitewater Institutional Review Board.