

Rethinking Inspiration: Studying Student Learning in Creative Writing



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Case studies

Background

The Myth of Inspiration

- Widespread belief that creative works are produced in single fits of inspiration which descend like luck
- Students may need to “unlearn” this myth in order to learn how writers actually write. As Wendy Bishop says “generation is the first requirement of a writing process.”

Why Journals of Observations?

- “Keeping a journal” is advice often offered to writers, but not always with direct instruction or discussion of why, or what makes a good journal entry.
- Keeping such a journal may also help writers develop the writerly habit of mind of “learning to see anew” (Meacham), or as Anne Lamott puts it:

“So much of writing is about sitting down and doing it every day, and so much of it is about getting into the custom of taking in everything that comes along, seeing it all as grist for the mill...”

Excerpts from “all class” journal

A scrap of conversation you overheard over the weekend.

Person 1: Wait, Kenny did what last night?
 Person 2: He and Zach were wrestling by the donuts, with their teeth.
 Person 1: Like, at each other or what?
 Person 2: No, they put their teeth on both sides of the donut container and were pulling on it like animals.”

“Girl 1 : Is your name Jason?

Guy : No?
 Girl 1 : Did you go to West?
 Guy : No, I’m from Eau Claire.

Girl 1 : You look just like a guy I knew in high school Jason Smith. Doesn’t he?

Girl 2 : Yeah he looks just like Jason. I’m sorry we don’t mean to bother you.”

Something that looked like something else:

“A girl trying a Chewbacca costume on her small dog. It was furry and brown with a fake black belt in the middle with fake gadgets on the fake belt.”

“A mail box on the end of a sketchy drive way shaking in the wind. Looked like a person moving back and forth.”

What makes a good journal entry?

- Quirky
- Organic (naturally occurred in the world)
- Not too personal (willing to share)
- Interesting
- Funny
- Can it be from media in addition to real life? Sure!
- Suggests a story
- Specific
- Suggests mystery
- Connects to a piece in progress
- Something out of place
- Something that is unlike me



Research questions and methodology

How does direct instruction in keeping a journal of observations influence introductory creative writing students’ attitudes about how creative writers generate material?

Students in multiple sections of Introduction to Creative Writing were invited to take a pre and post survey through Qualtrics, which included rating 15 items for their “helpfulness” for creative writers. Students in Stukenberg’s class were instructed in keeping journals of observations, practicing as a whole class on a shared google document and then individually, and some members’ work was selected for further case study. The project is being repeated in Spring 2017 with hope of better completion of the post-survey by using time in class for completion. Stukenberg’s students are also keeping the all-class journal all semester, without transitioning to individual journals.

Pre and post survey results

Which of the following are helpful for creative writers?

	Being Inspired			Being in the right mood to write			Keeping a journal			Writing from real life			Observing the world		
	Fall Pre N = 19	Fall Post N = 6	Sp Pre N = 82	Fall Pre N = 19	Fall Post N = 6	Sp Pre N = 82	Fall Pre N = 19	Fall Post N = 6	Sp Pre N = 82	Fall Pre N = 19	Fall Post N = 6	Sp Pre N = 82	Fall Pre N = 19	Fall Post N = 6	Sp Pre N = 82
Extremely helpful	84%	67%	61%	63%	50%	55%	32%	0%	31%	42%	50%	44%	47%	50%	63%
Helpful	16%	33%	38%	37%	33%	38%	47%	83%	45%	42%	50%	48%	42%	50%	33%
Not that helpful	0%	0%	1%	0%	17%	6%	21%	17%	22%	16%	0%	7%	11%	0%	4%
Possibly harmful	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%

3 observations from survey results

- In both Fall and Spring pre-surveys, the highest rated of all 15 items were “being inspired” and “being in the right mood to write.” This supports the idea that students enter the course with strong assumptions about the creative writing process (locating the ability to generate ideas somewhat out of writers’ conscious control), and Light’s observations of students’ understanding of the act of creative writing as located within the highly personal and internal self (Light “Avoiding”).

- Spring students in the pre-survey were somewhat less likely to see “being inspired” and “being in the right mood to write” as “extremely helpful,” and more likely than Fall students to see “observing the world” as helpful. While rates of having completed a prior first year Composition courses beyond English 101 were the same for both groups (77% and 78%), it could be that having taken multiple first year writing courses (which Spring students may be more likely to have done) contributed to their different understanding of the usefulness of the writing process and the transactional nature of writing. See case study discussion for further support.

- Students may develop a more sophisticated understanding of the writing process than their use of the language of inspiration suggests. Fall student quotes from final reflective letters show students claiming inspiration is important but then detailing a more nuanced understanding of how inspiration can be cultivated actively.

- “What I’ve learned about how Creative Writers come up with their work is that it’s easiest to come up with ideas when you have some kind of inspiration in your life. For example, past experiences can really help ignite an interesting topic for you to write about. Even things that you enjoy doing or just like in general can help you come up with something to write about.”

- “Everyone has some set of ideas and creative drives they can draw inspiration from, but inspiration can come from anywhere.”

- 3 Fall students’ work selected for further study
- Students 1 and 2 completed individual journals of observations as assigned
- Students 1 and 2 reported in final reflective letters, unprompted, that journal entries were the basis of pieces in their final portfolios

Student 1: changed pre-survey rating of the journal as “not that helpful” to “helpful” and wrote: “[W]riting from real life helped the most. Both of my poems were grounded in real life and I think that the journal entries that we did earlier in the semester really helped... in the past the most helpful was being in the mood to write just because it's so hard to get inspired when you are not..”

Student 2: saw “writing from real life” as important from the beginning of the course, and did not change rating for journal keeping as “helpful.” In the post survey, he saw “being in the right mood” as key, and increased ratings for “getting critique” and “having an audience.”

Student 3: completed all individual journal entries the night before it was due, and did not change rating of journal as “not very helpful.” Yet this student was impressed by, and increased his rating for, “getting critique from peers,” and his rating for “writing from real life.”

Discussion of case studies

- Case studies support Light’s observation that students conceive of creative writing in a variety of different ways even after taking the same course (“How Students”).
- Student 1 had completed First Year Writing Composition courses, while students 2 and 3 had not and so were experiencing peer review of writing for the first time, which may account for its powerful impact on them.

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