

**SHAMELESS VOICES PEDAGOGY: PRIVILEGING THE SPEECH OF  
EVERY CREATIVE WRITING STUDENT**

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What empowers an individual to speak—to write creatively—on any topic? Does one's ethnicity, gender or sexuality somehow privilege one to speak on specific topics, or merely to project what is perceived as the dominant discourse? To most of us, such notions are inherently myopic and a disservice to students in the creative writing classroom. To enable all creative writing students at all levels, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, to be empowered to speak with shameless voices in the classroom, teachers must develop a shameless framework that simultaneously disrupts students' dominant discourses while removing guilt, embarrassment, unworthiness and disgrace from the act of creative writing by authoritatively providing an environment of safety without influencing students with the teacher's critical voice.

What prevents a writer from speaking out? Besides being marginalized by the characteristics mentioned above, writers may not feel privileged to speak because of the belief that their life and writing are somehow boring and not worth reading about. Nancy Welch notes that a “belief in students' lack of anything worth writing about is also, too often, shared by teachers of creative writing”<sup>1</sup>. In addition, students who do not feel their voices are part of a dominant discourse – that is, “any discourse that moves with certain privilege through the world”<sup>2</sup> – may mute it in fear of standing out, or in hopes of pleasing a teacher whom the students believe has not provided, as Lynn Domina puts it, “permission to address one's personal obsessions”<sup>3</sup> and further, quoting William Stafford, because the teacher has failed to “[create] and atmosphere of trust in the classroom”<sup>4</sup>. Finally, some writers may feel they lack privilege because of their own failure to understand the perspective from which they write. Katharine Haake refers to this as “considering the fishbowl”:

Take a student, any student and tell her: Write a story. Because she cannot

see the fishbowl, she is stuck inside her own internal concept of what a story is and will disappear entirely into it. Ask her what a story is and she will have to get outside that concept and think about its various dimensions...She will have to consider the fishbowl.<sup>5</sup>

These examples of student disenfranchisement stem from the a common fundamental problem: Creative writing teachers who have not achieved a classroom environment that supports a “foundation of authentic writing—the necessity of revealing one's own perception of truth,”<sup>6</sup> who have not “[considered] the nature of the silences in their classrooms.”<sup>7</sup> By better understanding the creative process itself, correctly using their authority, and applying a Shameless pedagogy designed to disrupt students' dominant discourses, teachers can minimize the marginalization of their students by successfully empowering them with shameless voices.

To begin, we must understand what constitutes a “shameless voice” in students. Quite simply, it is writing confidentially produced without fear of guilt, embarrassment, unworthiness or disgrace. A shameless voice brings out a student's important writing—that writing they believe has worth, value. One can speak shamelessly only if one is secure and feels privileged to do so. The Shameless Voices pedagogy seeks to provide that security and privilege.

### **Shameless Pedagogy and The Goals of Creative Writing**

To speak with a shameless voice, or in the case of most writers, with several voices, is to examine aspects of the writer's own personality, the influences on those aspects, and to express them. Sometimes these aspects appear conflicting: humble and bold, strong and weak. It is no wonder that Carl Leggo claims the first commandment of the successful creative writing experience is to “revel in the multiplicity of voices.”<sup>8</sup> How does a shameless voice contribute to the goals of creative writing, or perhaps better stated, how do the goals of creative writing contribute to a student's shameless voices?

Before we can discuss the goals of creative writing in the Shameless pedagogy, we must reach some understanding of what constitutes creativity. Most researchers agree on what creativity *is*: that “a creative act must be original or novel, that it must be seen as valuable or interesting, and that it cannot be accidental.”<sup>9</sup> However, theories abound about how creativity *works*.

Older theories suggest creativity is an unconscious process, or a cognitive one. Others proposed that creativity is a function of one's personality.<sup>10</sup>

Newer theories, such as Teresa Amabile's, propose an interactive model of creativity, stating that “creativity is best conceptualized not as a personality trait or a general ability but as a behavior resulting from particular constellations of personal characteristics, cognitive abilities, and social environments,”<sup>11</sup> to which Linda Sarbo suggests the requirement that students be motivated to freely commit to performing the creative act, that “writers write best when they engage in writing for its own sake.”<sup>12</sup>

While these theories attempt to demystify creativity, we must also accept that there is a part of creativity that should remain mystifying. Creativity, like the human soul, is indeed

influenced by our unconscious, our cognitive abilities, our personality traits and social environments. However, none of these fully describes creativity—or the potential for creativity—any more than they do the soul.

But if we can accept that creativity is *largely* governed by Amabile's swirling constellations of one's personality, intelligence and social background, then the goal of creative writing must be to allow the student to examine all these facets of these influences and to bring them out; to share them safely with others without shame, and in turn to examine other student revelations from their own unique perspectives, and so introduce and be introduced to new voices through shared writing.

By confronting the student with these aspects of their own creative influences as well as those of their peers, and then asking them to reconsider their voices, teachers can effectively use creative writing to allow their students to learn to speak shamelessly.

### **The Shameless Framework**

Armed with some understanding of what shameless voices are, and why we want students to use them creatively, we must consider the structure of a classroom that promotes an environment necessary to allow students to begin speaking with privilege, regardless of their perceived place in society's dominant discourses. The structure of such a Shameless Voices pedagogy begins with the role of the teacher.

### ***The Role of the Teacher***

Teachers can ensure students are privileged to speak by simultaneously asserting and

surrendering portions of their authority. The teacher must assert authority by demanding that every student be tolerant of each other's writing. Tolerant not in the sense that all student-as-readers will necessarily agree with the writer's viewpoint, or be uncritical of it, but rather that all will act in good faith to look at the student-as-writer's work from a comprehensive point of view, what Domina refers to as an "adequate audience."<sup>13</sup> The Shameless pedagogy requires the student feel safe enough to share various aspects of their personality, often with total strangers. Initial reluctance can be overcome sooner by ensuring everyone understands and follows the rules of respect and professionalism.

Unfortunately, at the same time, students quickly learn that that the best way to meet their own immediate personal objectives (to be accepted, or to receive a good grade) may be to emulate the teacher's style or voice, or to pick out what they believe the teacher "likes" and try to copy those techniques. All of these activities have the effect of minimizing or muting altogether the student's voice in order to regurgitate what they think they are being asked to say, to speak to what they may believe is the dominant discourse of the class: The teacher's discourse. Therefore, teachers must surrender their authority by "[being] prepared to respond intelligently and diplomatically to work which confronts their own prejudices."<sup>14</sup>

Further, teachers must nurture students' creativity, "[urging them] to write out of their selves"<sup>15</sup> by engaging their imaginations at the expense of the teacher's own voice. In fact, Patrick Bizzaro contends that the goal of creative writing teachers should not be to judge students' texts, but to "introdu[ce] students to the many selves writers may become."<sup>16</sup> To accomplish this he quotes William Stafford, saying teachers must "accompany [students] as [they] discovered for [themselves] whatever it is that most satisfyingly links to [their] own life

and writings.”<sup>17</sup>

These ideas of teachers' influence have important ramifications even before class begins. After all, at the college level it is the teacher who will select the required texts for the course. To choose one author over another, or even one creative writing theory over another, exerts unwanted authority over students' voices before they ever set foot inside the classroom. Rather, teachers must seek to integrate theories of writing and creativity, adopting the strengths and minimizing the weaknesses of each, in order to best serve their students. Further, teachers must seek to minimize the influence of other literary authors by limiting, or even eliminating, the use of non-student works for purposes of providing samples of what “good” writing looks like. In a Shameless Voices pedagogy, the only “good” writing is student writing (although student writing will be classified neither as “good” nor “bad” as will be discussed later).

### ***Course Structure***

An ideal creative writing classroom supports the Shameless Voices pedagogy. As noted earlier, this requires an environment of safety which leads to privilege which leads to creativity. In the creative writing classroom, safety begins with being emotionally comfortable in the writing environment. One of the ways to make student more comfortable is to establish patterns and rhythms designed to make them write, and write a lot. After all, the end goal of any creative writing class is, as Peter Elbow puts it, “tons and tons and tons of writing.”<sup>18</sup> One of the teacher's goals is to materialize a sufficient quantity of writing in his or her students to allow them to experiment with various voices and aspects of their personalities and become comfortable with these voices both as writers and as readers.

What can be done to encourage a class that makes “safety in writing [its] highest priority”<sup>19</sup> and also privileges all its students to speak? That is to say, how does the teacher allow his or her students to speak in a manner that is experimental—perhaps politically incorrect—by revealing the unexplored aspects of their personalities? What does a creative writing course that adheres to the Shameless Voices pedagogy look like?

Haake states, quite accurately, that teachers must “provid[e] a structure within which students can come to know themselves as writers.”<sup>20</sup> The structure of the Shameless Voices framework is simple. It should be divided into two parts: a classroom that presents and discusses theory in terms of the impact of dominant discourses on student writing and; a workshop that allows for the writing, reading and critique of student work. The classroom is designed, to paraphrase Francois Camoin, to make student writing safe. The workshop, to “keep it disturbing.”<sup>21</sup>

### *The Classroom*

The classroom portion serves two primary purposes for students. First, it allows them a place to read and talk about ideas on what creative writing is, to consider their fishbowls. By using texts that examine and discuss creative writing theories, students will better see and come to understand their own perspective on writing. Second, the classroom serves as an important writing warm-up. Many students are initially uncomfortable with the idea of this “creative writing” thing. Some students perceive the blank page is a world with no boundaries, lacking form or structure, and may become paralyzed by their imagined vision of total freedom. Writing assignments in the classroom portion are structured—usually formatted essays on what they have

read about and discussed in class. These assignments allow students to explore theory and their creativity in a structured way, giving them a comfortable place to “color in the lines,” so to speak, before moving to freer forms of writing.

The classroom also provides an important benefit to the teacher: A place to provide authority without detracting from student voices. Because assignments are structured, teachers can help the student work on basic writing skills without appearing to punish student creativity.

### *The Workshop*

The workshop provides the student greater time and access to their writing. It is imperative that students enter the workshop with the understanding that they are now writers. Before writing begins, teachers should establish in the minds of students that they are “real writers.”<sup>22</sup> However, Welch recognizes the danger of “maintaining...workshops as places where [students] prove their mettle.”<sup>23</sup> Students must realize they are not being asked to produce the next great work of Literature with a capital “L”. The workshop is no place for such unnecessary pressure.

Although students will play a significant role as readers during the workshop, ideally, there are no required texts for the workshop portion. That bears mentioning again: No published texts in the workshop. Outside influence of other authors should be minimized or eliminated. The focus should always be on student text for reading and discussion in the workshop. Students must understand what they will develop in a Shameless Voices workshop: their “creative writing voice(s)”, and a “reader's voice”, in the form of responses to other student writing. Several types of exercises, perhaps better stated as experiments, make up the workshop, including:

- guided and free writings;
- reading of and responses to other student-writer work;
- radical revision of commented work and;
- a collaborative writing approach I will refer to as continuation.

Guided writing is similar to what many students (and teachers) think of when discussing creative writing exercises. Guided writing provides three things: a modest shift from the foundation of established safety to more open risk taking in writing; a semblance of structure many students may still need to ward off the paralysis total freedom sometimes represents and; a mechanism for teachers to continue instruction on the appropriate method to critique other student work. Guided writing uses simple props (pictures of art, newspaper articles, etc.) or music in languages unknown to the students, to inspire new writing ideas. Students are given specific requirements for each exercise. The requirements may be anything: grammatical, thematic, or even based on other creative writing pedagogies. For example, students could be instructed to use a semi-colon appropriately at least three times throughout the text, to work with a specific human experience, to write in a feminist point of view, or all three at the same time. They could be instructed to use writing techniques such as Haake's "burrowing", using a word or phrase that begins the writing process, until there are no words left to say, then beginning again using a word from that writing. Guided writing will provide a safety net for students as they move into the more uncomfortable space of free writing by allowing students to build trust with their own voices.

Free writing is just that: Students write as their voices dictate to them. The form can be poetry, flash fiction (generally speaking, stories of 2000 words or less) or a short fiction that is

pieced together through the course, based on student preferences. Free writing provides students the greatest opportunity to shape their work and the bulk of student writing should be free writing.

An important requirement for the Shameless Voices pedagogy is the sharing of student work with each other. This gives every student-as-writers the rare guarantee of a captive audience. It also provides students-as-readers the opportunity to reflect on the voices of their peers. To ensure students actually read each other's work, they must be required to respond to it with the understanding that the teacher will be grading these responses. In this way, students learn to properly critique each other, using their experience as a reader to comment on their perception of the student-writer's text, rather than trying to "fix" problems with it. The other purpose in commenting on the text is to help the writer understand the reader's perception of the text: What the reader believes the narrator is saying, or not saying, feeling or not feeling. The reader uses the response format as a platform to inform the writer how they were impacted by the text. This is important in revision exercises as the writer will modify their story in an experiment to radically alter this impact of the text in order to discover what else lies beneath.

The radical revision may be one of the most difficult of the workshop. Writers have created works in the guided and free writing experiments based on their perception conceived during the act of creativity in order to connect a voice to an aspect of their personality. Now, they must reconsider it. Leggo states that writers must "question connections between voices and selfhood."<sup>24</sup> The revision process seeks to help the writer accomplish this by asking them to review what other student-readers have said about the text and then modify their text in an attempt to alter those perceptions. This experimental writing allows the student-writer to explore

new voices that lie within the work, or can be injected into it. It is not enough for the revision simply to correct bad grammar, add or edit out more text. It must radically alter the way other student-writers *perceive* the work. For example, a dark story about a lover's quarrel that ends with a break-up as seen from the perspective of one of the lovers might be radically altered to be told from the perspective of a co-worker and the co-worker's influence on the lovers, perhaps for better or for worse in the radical revision. The ending may be the same, but the reader's perception of the ending should be different.

Finally, student-writers will perform continuations of other student work. It is one thing to write a poem or story using the student's voice to shape a given theme or topic. The continuation writing experiment seeks to allow the student-writer to blend their voice with that of another in a completed story. Students choose from other student-writers' text they have read and commented on as readers, and now begin to shape the story with the inclusion of their own voices. The goal is not to duplicate the original writer's form or style, or to make the text "better". Rather, the student-writer should consider how their voice might alter the story and continue the story from a new perspective. The student-writer doing a continuation might introduce new characters, expand on existing characters, add or remove events or thematic elements in order to provide an "alternate universe" for the text. The continuation does not necessary have to begin where the original writer left off. The student-writer can begin many years before or after the events of the original, or weave entirely new and related threads. The point of the experiment is for the student-writer to seek to understand the original writer's point of view, and to shamelessly expand on that point of view in a harmonious way using their own voice.

Both the radical revision and the continuation seek to disrupt the student's dominant discourses. “[This] fulfills the students' “need to learn...that reading is only a preliminary to further writing, that text is a movable thing.”<sup>25</sup>

The results of all these experiments should be kept by students in a series of portfolios. These portfolios become the basis for how the student will be graded in the class.

### **Evaluation and Grading**

Part of the problem with evaluating student work is, as Stratton notes, that students “are obsessed with grades.”<sup>26</sup> Grading is an essential form of feedback to students and teachers must not fear this responsibility.

The portfolios are key tools for student evaluation. The writing experiments described above become essential components to students' portfolios. Using the components of the student portfolios, their structured writing voice(s), their creative writing voice(s), and their reader's voice(s), provides the teacher with wonderful opportunities for grading without discouraging student creativity.

The student's structured writing voice can be safely evaluated for basic writing skills in the form of the formatted essays from the classroom and guided writing from the workshop. The teacher can use these works to trade ideas with individual students about the act of creative writing, while grading them on basic writing skills, correct use of the writing format, and other technical requirements. The essays and guided writing give the student a safe platform to discuss the aspects of creative writing that they wish to explore or find confusing, and the teacher a way to grade basic writing skills without hindering creativity.

The creative writing voice should be evaluated by the teacher in a manner similar to Haake's method of exploration, that is “talking until [the teacher finds] out something interesting [they] didn't know ahead of time.”<sup>27</sup> Like students, the teacher should not attempt to fix “bad” creative writing. Rather, the teacher should comment in the role Elbow prefers—as a “reader” and not as an “editor.”<sup>28</sup> The teacher describes how the text impacted him or her: What was clear, or rang true; what was confusing or could not be identified with. Further, the teacher's comments about creative voices should not include words such as “good” or “bad”, “liked”, “hated”. Comments should describe to the student the experience of the teacher as a reader.

Finally, throughout the course, students acted as readers for other students. Using a reader's voice, students provided feedback to other students in the form of short paper responses that describe their experience of the reading. Similarly to structured writing exercises, the teacher may evaluate this reader's voice more critically, and without adversely impacting the student-reader's creativity, because it is not the creativity of the student-reader that is being judged but rather the student's ability to analyze. Teachers may more freely point out successes and failures in the student-reader's basic writing skills, or even their ability to read into another student-writer's text, since the student's creative writing voice is not under the microscope. This also provides the teacher an important opportunity to make students better readers as well as writers.

Wendy Bishop discusses a modified portfolio that helps students “learn that revision is long-term, recursive process” so that writers may “take pride in their own maturity of expression.”<sup>29</sup> However, a portfolio built of dozens of rough drafts may be thick and go largely unread by both teacher and student. Instead, teachers should consider portfolios consisting of the following:

1. The student's creative writing voice(s). This work should be of final draft quality. This writing should reflect the student's shameless voice(s). This portfolio will include the best of the students' guided writing, free writing, radical revision and continuation. It may also include, at the teacher's discretion, "process writing" as Elbow describes in the Bush interview<sup>30</sup>, for purposes of allowing the student to share difficulties or insights in creating the work. Drafts of assignments can be turned in and discussed throughout the semester, but should not be part of this final portfolio. Comments by the teacher should not be in the form of "change this and it would be better", but instead by asking questions about what the writer meant, "how the text was put together, what it does,"<sup>31</sup> or places the teacher-as-reader was expecting to go in the text, further identifying the teacher as a reader to the student-writer.
2. The student's reader's voice. This includes structured writing exercises from classroom essays, and responses to student writing. The writing should follow whatever standard the teacher requires for professional writing, and unlike the creative voice portfolio, can even be evaluated by the teacher from the point of view of an editor looking to publish the student's critique of the original text.

Creative writing teachers may never agree on whether student writing can be effectively or objectively graded. However, in the proper framework, student writing can be successfully evaluated in such a way that allows the student to continue to explore and experiment, ensuring their shameless voices are not silenced because of a perceived failure to write to a specific dominant discourse.

### **The Importance of a Shameless Voices Pedagogy**

To afford all students the best chance to speak with a privileged voice, regardless of ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, or other factors perceived to be overpowering to student voices, teachers must construct a framework of safety by building trust—student-teacher trust as well as student-student trust—through the appropriate application of authority by insistence on professional tolerance inside the classroom—not necessarily tolerance of ideas, but tolerance of one's right and obligation of all to speak.

Further, the teacher must provide students the tools necessary to consider what creative writing is, in the form of theory, in order for them to understand the dominant discourses that have ruled over their voices their entire lives, and to shamelessly follow the veins of their own voices matrixed within those discourses.

Finally, the successful creative writing classroom will continuously find ways to disrupt students' points of view by making them into critical readers and commentators, and using these skills to re-evaluate their writing before they become overly comfortable or complacent, and unconsciously re-establish the dominant discourses of their lives.

Writers write best when they feel safe, believe they are privileged to speak, and then do so shamelessly.

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