Honoring lived experiences through creative nonfiction writing instruction in secondary education: An arts-based perspective in ELA pedagogy

by

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A.A., Allen County Community College, 2015
B.A., University of Kansas, 2016
M.A., Kansas State University, 2019

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Curriculum & Instruction
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Abstract

This arts-based research study explores the impact on student narrative voice, meaning making, and sense of fulfillment when tenets of writing creative prose are introduced into ELA curriculum. There is a pedagogical gap in that ELA curriculum typically consists of reading literature then writing essays about literature; students aren't given the instruction or opportunity to write their own creative literature. The creative writing practiced in this study focuses on personal narrative writing in the genre of creative nonfiction. In this 2-week study, students were asked to participate in lessons and activities to learn creative components of writing dialogue, show don't tell, close POV, tone, pacing, collaboration, giving and receiving feedback, and revision. They were then asked to consolidate their work and expand it into a story telling a moment from their lived experiences. They received extensive, individualized feedback in each phase of the study and were asked to revise their work and submit a final draft.

The study followed arts-based research practices as outlined by scholars such as Patricia Leavy, Tom Barone, and Elliot Eisner, among others. Theories guiding the practices involved are expressivism, self-determination theory, and social cognitive theory. Literature informing underlying pedagogical philosophy engrained within the study focus on autonomous learning, student-centered learning, classroom writing communities, student/teacher rapport, creative writing pedagogy, and guiding feedback. A creative writing pedagogical cycle was developed and utilized for this study, comprised of reading literature, discussing literature, learning tenets of creative writing presented in the literature, collaboration, feedback, and revision.

The presentation of the findings and analysis of this study, found in chapter 4, is a creative personal narrative account of the researcher during the experience of executing this study. The interwoven findings and analysis explore the impact on student voice, writing

confidence, and meaning making during the process of learning creative writing tenets. The findings include beautiful development of student voice and expression of meaning making. Through a reader response analysis lens, the researcher also explores authentic meaning in the process of teaching these students creative writing.

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Dr. Vicki Sherbert

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Abstract

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When I completed my undergraduate degree, I never dreamed of going so far as to complete a PhD, too. I was so very emotionally attached to the knowledge that I needed a bachelor's degree; I would have been happy if my formal education ended there. Then, opportunities opened for me to continue my education as a graduate student and I will be forever grateful. I want to thank the Education Department, the English Department, and the Graduate School at Kansas State University for accepting me and providing opportunities for professional and personal growth. Learning more and earning graduate degrees has provided me with more possibilities than I had the right to hope for. I particularly want to thank Dr. Vicki Sherbert for her tireless positivity and encouragement during my journey as a graduate student at K-State, and for all of the guidance given as my major professor. I also want to thank my other committee members for their time, brilliant insight, and helpful feedback: Dr. Amanda Lickteig, Dr. Suzanne Porath, and Dr. Shirley Tung.

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Above all, I give credit and gratitude to my Father in Heaven who has watched over me all of my life and given me grace and mercy. He has given me such a beautiful life. He has enabled me to earn this education that has opened me to so many fulfilling experiences and blessings. I thank Him for His love and for all of the ways He shows me that love.

Dedication

For J, E, and M – as always.

Preface

An inspiration of this arts-based research is Joanne Oppenheim's *Dear Miss Breed: True Stories of the Japanese American Incarceration During World War II and a Librarian Who Made a Difference*. Oppenheim's work is a creative nonfiction account of the young Japanese American experience in the internment camps during World War II. The book integrates letters from the children along with many other pieces of primary sources that help demonstrate and explain the situation. Oppenheim then, also, blends it all together through her creative nonfiction writing, research, and explanations to make it a cohesive read that is easier to consume and understand. Therefore, the young people tell their own stories and have their voices heard while Oppenheim compiles and facilitates the distribution of their story for continuity and an overall unified piece.

Inspired by the concept of letting students speak their experiences for themselves, I tried to apply these principles during the Covid-19 school shut downs of 2020 and the following year of extensive and oppressive restrictions. This particular endeavor is not included in this dissertation but I explain it to offer context for the development of this study's parameters. I gave my students certain prompts and instructed them to tell the stories of what they were experiencing. I found that so very many adults were telling youth what they were feeling and seeing and thinking – not many were listening. So, I tried to listen by allowing them to say whatever they wanted to say in their responses to the frequent writing prompts. I also indicated to them that, if they didn't feel like responding to a given prompt, to write about whatever they were thinking and feeling at the time. I encouraged them to share stories of what they were going through and to integrate as much feeling and description as they felt inspired to write. Carrying over that sentiment into this study, I am attempting to research the effects when students are

specifically taught to tell their personal narratives, enhanced through creative nonfiction writing instruction, to better honor and understand their lived experiences.

I am by no means equating the story of my students during Covid-19 with that of the Japanese Americans during WWII, nor am I comparing my current students with either period of hardship. I am, though, utilizing a similar model of collecting students' writings about their lived experiences to let them tell their own stories that inform this arts-based research project.

This work is original and completely unaided by artificial intelligence. The writing samples from participant students are also original and were written specifically for this study, as is indicated in the writing. All names of students and their school have been changed for privacy protection; consent and ascent have been granted for all student work integrated in this work. IRB permissions were in place before the study began and all prescribed protocols were followed.

Miriam Barton
July, 2026
Kansas, USA

Chapter 1 - Introduction to Honoring Lived Experiences Through Creative Nonfiction Writing Instruction: An Arts-based Perspective in ELA Pedagogy

I was five years old; it was a typically, oppressively hot summer south of Houston, Texas, and I had been working on project *Buy a Popsicle* for weeks. Finally, in my tiny hands I held a heavy peanut can laden with painstakingly collected pennies.

I held it to my ear and tilted it upside down and right side up, back and forth. I liked listening to the violent *clangs* and *thunks* as I shook that old peanut can. I dutifully *clinked* every precious penny I could find into that dented can. One particularly good haul of pennies I had scooped out of my big brother's jar in his messy bedroom. I was nervous at first, that he would notice and be mad at me, but after a few days I congratulated myself on my stealth. My stomach thrilled in anticipation of what was to come when I sifted my fingers through those dingy copper pennies. When the can grew heavy for my little hands and, when shaking it, made a tight *chink* sound instead of more cacophonous *shunks* I knew that it was finally full enough. There wasn't any space left in the can and it was time to make my move.

I approached the stickered white ice cream truck armed with my full peanut can. I surveyed the faded stickers serving as a menu as I waited for my turn. I knew that I needed an ice cream popsicle with gumball eyes. Ice cream because it was more filling than the juice popsicles. Gumballs so that I could still have a treat to last after the popsicle was gone. I was going to be smart about it.

I picked the pink panther. The ice cream was supposed to taste like cherries but I knew it would really just taste like creamy sugar and leave a pink coating on my tongue. Stuff of fantasy.

I hoped the day wasn't too hot. That it wouldn't melt before I could lick and bite it down to the wood that impaled the cat-head shaped luxury.

Finally, I was the one facing the man in the window of the ice cream truck. He had a beard and wore glasses. His blue t-shirt had holes in it so I noticed some of the brown hairs that covered his large soft belly.

Confidently, excitedly, I held up my can of pennies and asked "Is this enough?"

I am positive that he noticed my stricken face as he shook his head and said "No."

My shoulders probably slumped as I turned my back to the ice cream truck and paced back across the gravel road to the rusted trailer with holes in the floor that my family called home. I cradled the can of pennies to my chest, not understanding.

Thinking back, I know that there were enough pennies to buy a popsicle from the ice cream man. The issue was not the amount. The problem is that my copper gilded tablets weren't good enough for him. He preferred the *purring crinkling* of dollar bills to my noisy pennies.

My pennies were enough.

Just not *good enough*.

My pennies represent the tiny, underappreciated moments. The little things that stay with us. The miniscule moments that build us, one-by-one, together making something quite valuable.

In the same vein as the pennies not being appreciated, I want to apply this creative nonfiction story from my childhood as a metaphor representing the scope of this arts-based research project. Our students have cans full to the brim of their own pennies, i.e.

underappreciated yet valuable stories from their real lived experiences. What if we, as educators, were to see value in the tiny moments of their lives that make up their realities and perspectives? We could do so by integrating nonfiction creative writing pedagogy into standard ELA curriculum.

Unfortunately, creative writing instruction is all too often relegated to the "corner" so to speak, of ELA curriculum. Some ELA instructors undergo training in creative writing pedagogy but most do not, often leaving the skill ignored completely in secondary settings (Hellmann, 2024). Or at bigger, luckier schools creative writing might be offered as an elective but still separate from standard ELA classrooms. Curriculum and pedagogy have narrowed considerably, ignoring creative writing (Hellmann, 2024) due to state and federal mandates regarding standardized testing and isolated requirements for reading comprehension (Applebee & Langer, 2011), despite research conveying the heavy import and benefit of creative writing in learning spaces (Pitre, 2019).

What if we took the time, and learned the skills, to teach students how to polish these priceless pennies and put them together to form something beautiful, something these students could be proud of? "Telling, writing and sharing stories about our life experiences allows us to stop and reflect on our lives from different perspectives, and can thus have a long-lasting positive impact on our development and our lives" (Martin, et al. 2021, p. 482). We honor the lived experiences of our students by teaching them creative nonfiction writing skills, and by so doing, encouraging them to tell their own stories and enable them with the power to build their own voice and perspective.

The purpose of this arts-based research project was to explore how students represent their lived experiences through creative prose when given creative writing instruction as well as

to engage in a conversation about the impact creative writing instruction has, or does not have, on students' perceived writing voices. This arts-based research project allows for "understanding identities" and meaning making of lived experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 95), with pedagogical foci in: a student-centered approach, a positive classroom writing community, positive student-teacher rapport, and application of feedback contributing to revision. This study attempts to build student writing voices by encouraging meaning making out of the moments of their lives through creative nonfiction writing instruction. Driving components to this research rationale and framework include elements of creative writing skills applied to personal narrative writing, autonomous learning, Expressivism, Self-Determination Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory.

The study found that secondary students engage with and represent their lived experiences during creative nonfiction writing instruction in ways that are fulfilling, satisfying, endearing, and meaningful. Much like watering a dehydrated plant, students seemed to soak up the instruction and their writing bloomed under the attention. They just needed to be given the simple lessons developed for this study along with the time and space to find their creative writing voices. Students expressed the impact of finding their writing voices through learning creative nonfiction writing with words like "freeing," being "proud" of themselves, and it being a "meaningful" endeavor. Many of them relayed feelings of enjoying it much more than essay writing while others expressed that it helped them improve on their overall writing; i.e. they feel they will be better at essay writing now because of how they were allowed to explore language in new ways.

Creative Nonfiction Writing and Personal Narrative Writing

Before we get too deep into this study, it is important to clarify personal narrative writing's place within creative writing and set an understanding for these frequent terms that will be used throughout this dissertation. Creative writing contains 4 main categories: poetry, fiction, playwriting, and nonfiction. Within each of these categories, including creative nonfiction, there are several existing and emerging subcategories (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 *Place for Personal Narrative Writing within Creative Writing*



Creative nonfiction in general pays close attention to relaying true events with attention to aesthetically skillful, often very descriptive, prose with focus on the audience. Fitting into creative nonfiction, memoirs specifically capture the lived experiences of the author. However, while both memoir and personal narrative writing attempt to invoke emotion from the reader by aesthetically relaying lived experiences, most often including a type of lesson to learn, there are key differences. Memoirs are a collection of events that are written in a type of story arc with a thesis whereas personal narrative writing, on the other hand, is just one story of one lived event (Networlding, 2025). Regardless of the subgenre, creative nonfiction "allows us to deal with our experiences and emotions from different perspectives, change perspectives, step back from or zoom into a certain experience or emotion, and find new ways to express ourselves" (Martin, et al. 2021, p. 482). Specifically, personal narrative writing endeavors to enlighten and entertain by

employing “literary style and techniques” to relay a moment from one’s life, usually written in first-person point of view (POV) (Donlin, 2020, p. 3). Personal narrative writing, within the genre of creative writing, contributes valued and needed perspective on authentic lived reality (Donlin, 2020, p. 5). Within this study I refer to personal narrative writing in reference to the stories my students and I share. I refer to creative nonfiction writing as the practice of and skills in the tenets of creative prose as they pertain to nonfiction writing. Both terms will be used frequently throughout this project.

Rationale

As with any activity that builds a sense of self, personal narrative writing acts as a gateway for claiming agency. Agency allows intentional choices, influenced by “beliefs, desires, emotions, and moral commitments […] which [choices are…] interwoven with culture, society, and history” (Brockmeir, 2009, p. 219). Humans are subject to their environments, communities, health conditions, social conditioning, etc., the acknowledgement of which forms the foundation for developing comprehension of ourselves and the world around us. When denied autonomy we will do absolutely anything, as agents, to gain self-sovereignty and behave autonomously.

Through this communion with the idea that our students are agents and should therefore be allowed agency within the curriculum, we open *agentive discourse*, being “a vehicle by which we navigate the extended space of our ‘possibility of relationship’ to the world and ourselves” (Brockmeir, 2009, p. 226). Agency integration helps deconstruct the power structures in place (e.g., teacher vs. student, societal, underrepresentation of groups within curriculum). Integrating agency into the classroom through creative writing invites backstories, preferences, and unique perspectives into the curriculum (Vaughn, 2024, p. 222). Students lay claim to their agency through social contexts, by interacting and negotiating their ideas and purposes in learning

situations (Vaughn, 2024, p. 225), in large part through narrative – both spoken and written. "Narrative exponentially expands the reach of human meanings and thus of possibilities for action" (Brockmeir, 2009, p. 226). Narrative writing enables students to elaborate on their sense of self while expounding on their subjective perspectives. In other words, it allows them a voice, making them agents of their own stories as valued human beings.

Specifically in this study, to begin opening agentive discourse, the students were asked to choose stories of a moment from their lives in which they were proud of themselves, learned an important lesson, experienced something unforgettable, felt strongly connected to their heritage, or realized something about themselves. They were then allowed choice in how they framed that moment, how they expressed the event, and how they expressed the meaning they made from it. They displayed agency through each choice made in the process, in determining what it meant to them, and in their expressions of that meaning. However, this type of agentive practice is not commonly found in ELA classrooms.

There is currently a pedagogical and research gap with regards to creative writing instruction at the secondary level. Creative writing is typically only offered at large schools as an elective, not integrated within a regular grade-level curriculum. In fact, currently, in the state-mandated objectives for core curriculum found in *Kansas Standards for English Language Arts* the word *creative* only appears *once* in the entire 92-page document, and it is under the category of Speaking and Learning, not *Writing* (Figure 1.2). Moreover, there are only *three* ELA standards reflective of creative writing (prose) tenets, which are repeated for every secondary

Figure 1.2 *Kansas ELA Standard Containing "Creative" (KSDE, 2025, p. 89)*

SL.11-12.1c	Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspe

Note. KSDE did not complete the sentence, or even the word "perspective," in the singular standard that includes the word "creative" in the 92-page document outlining required ELA standards in public schools.

level, under the Writing category (Figure 1.3). Unfortunately, these standards are frequently ignored, or seen as a requirement to summarize stories they have read, the concept of creatively

Figure 1.3. *Kansas ELA Standards Regarding Narrative Writing (KSDE, 2025, p. 77)*

W.11-12.3.b	Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
W.11-12.3.c	Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome.
W.11-12.3.d	Use precise words and phrases, telling details and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

writing original work outweighed by all of the other required standards that are more easily quantifiable, such as grammar and reading comprehension via multiple-choice questions about literature (Hellmann, 2024). Even though "creative writing can enhance our learning capability" (Martin, et al., 2021, p. 482), and there is rhetoric spoken about how teachers need to help their students use their voice and tell their stories, we really aren't teaching them *how* to claim their voice or tell their stories effectively.

Some of the problem lies in teachers being mostly untrained in creative writing themselves, therefore lacking in confidence and/or belief of credibility to teach it. Teachers are overall not prepared to teach creative writing because across most universities, "preservice teachers take far more literature classes than writing classes. Creative writing courses are not required, and they are difficult to fit into the heavy course load[s] required by [their respective]

programs" (Altier, 2022, p. 4). Since creative writing is not required curriculum for preservice teachers, it is often overlooked despite research discussing how "teachers [perceptions] that writing about their lives can support their professional development" and "creative expression [contributes to] new perspectives in teachers' pedagogical thinking and teaching actions" (Martin, et al., 2021, p. 481). To compound the problem of teachers untrained in creative writing, there is a "dearth of reliable sources on the effective teaching of creative writing and implementation of its accompanying pedagogies at the secondary level – especially when compared to the flood of resources on other types of writing available from educational publishers" (Ash, et al., 2021, p. 16). When pre-service ELA teachers are encouraged, allowed the freedom in their program of study to take creative writing courses, and provided sufficient resources they learn how to write creatively themselves – making them able and confident to also teach it. ELA instructors' "confidence as writers influences their pedagogical choices regarding […offering more] reflective approaches to their teaching of writing. Moreover, engaging teachers as creative writers can enhance their professional development and inspire them to develop their pedagogical practices" (Martin, et al., 2021, pp. 482-483). Unfortunately, the result of underprepared ELA teachers, along with a shortage of helpful resources for teaching creative writing, results in students not being taught this enriching, some say vital, skill.

Although research suggests that the more students write in general, the better they will do in all other academic content areas (Graham, 2014, Ash et al., 2021), more research is needed. Students spend about half of all school time writing which increases the importance for focused instruction of effective writing (Kaya & Ates, 2016, p. 140), and writing projects that are inherently enjoyable. Learning enjoyable writing processes metacognitively improves communication, persuasion, reading comprehension, language learning, attention, memory,

problem solving, social cognition, self-control and self-teaching (Flavell, 1979). Feedback-based, process driven writing experiences that add enjoyment to the curriculum help "students improve their skills of telling about their knowledge, emotions and thoughts by writing, create an interest and desire in them to write, and teach them the habit of writing" (Kaya & Ates, 2016, p. 138). While the import of writing across the disciplines is established (Soliday, 2011; Segal, 2005), additional research is needed to examine the correlation between creative writing and academic performance in remaining content areas.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do secondary students autonomously engage with and represent their lived experiences during creative nonfiction writing instruction in the classroom?
2. How do students describe the impact of creative nonfiction instruction on their sense of voice as writers?

Definitions

The application and further explanation of these definitions are spread out through chapters 1-3.

1. *Agency* – is "related to dispositional dimensions where individuals possess personal dispositions to act and transform their environment"; is "related to motivational dimensions in that individuals regulate their actions and exist within contexts and make choices and decisions"; and is "associated with positionality in that individuals negotiate within the collective and exist in complex social contexts" (Vaughn, et al., 2020, p. 535).
2. *Agent* – a person empowered in the ability to act and speak for themselves.
3. *Agentive Discourse* – when two or more agents, in this case the students, along with their peers, and their teacher, participate in autonomous expression that includes dialogue

between the individuals involved. It is "a vehicle by which we navigate the extended space of our 'possibility of relationship' to the world and ourselves" (Brockmeir, 2009, p. 226).

4. *Arts-Based Research* – methodology or practice of qualitative research that attempts to create and understand meaning through aesthetic representation. Findings and analysis of research are expressed by artistic mediums, rather than more typical academic essays. It appeals to "expanded audience[s], […including] members of audience[s] who do not reside only in the academy" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 63). There are "two dimensions of an arts based project (the manner of inquiry and the aesthetic qualities of the 'product') [and they are] interrelated, synergistic, mutually reinforcing. They are also often […] engaged in simultaneously, as the process of inquiry may occur within the act of composition and vice versa" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 20).
5. *Autonomy* – the ability to freely make informed decisions that complement the values and understanding of the individual; self-sovereignty.
6. *Autonomous Learning* – knowledge acquired through self-exploration, meaning-making, and decision making.
7. *Classroom Writing Community* – a classroom curriculum and environment conducive to constructive collaborative work that encourages positivity and writing production.
8. *Creative Nonfiction Writing* – writing of real events with strong emphasis on aesthetic craft and descriptive skill for the purpose of appealing to an audience.
9. *Creative Writing Instruction* – the art of teaching elements of written expression that steps outside of the confines of Standard Written English prose and regular essay writing conventions. Emphasis is placed on aesthetic skill and audience.

10. *Expressivism* – the concept and import placed on how a person chooses to express themselves, how they frame their thought and experiences (Burnam & Powell, 2014).
11. *Guiding Feedback* – transforms "mindsets and practices related to giving, receiving, and implementing feedback through [a] culturally responsive approach" (Newton, 2022, p. 5). More than simply telling students/peers mechanical components of their writing to fix, guiding feedback engages with the material students are producing, asking critical questions and prompting students to do the same about their writing. Sometimes described as "wise feedback."
12. *Personal Narrative Writing* – the practice of telling one's personal experiences, using creative means such as figurative language, "show don't tell," point of view, dialogue, allusion, imagery, description, pacing, etc.
13. *Narrative Imagination* - "a form and practice of human agency" (Brockmeir, 2009, p. 227), demonstrating the self as an agentive being making sense of ourselves through language.
14. *Reader Response Analysis* – analytical lens that prioritizes "engaging with the text affectively, focusing on the pleasure and satisfaction of reading" (Momeni, 2026, pp. 2-3), examining the transactional nature between reader and text dependent upon a reader's subjectivities, preferences, and personal aesthetic (Rosenblatt, 1994), and constructs understanding of a text within a "situational frame" that encompasses reader with the text (VaeBen & Strasen, 2021, p. 137).
15. *Reflective Writing* – makes connections between new information and personal experiences, integrating that new information with self-awareness and getting in touch with significant discoveries, both internal and external (Schroder, 2023).

16. *Self-Determination Theory* – The assertion that, though we are subject to surrounding culture and environments, we as individuals decide what the moments of our lives mean to us and therefore practice autonomy as we make meaning (Maydew, 2025).
17. *Social-Cognitive Theory* – the philosophy asserting that individual perspectives are made up of collective contexts including multiple subjectivities and outside influences (Bandura, 1989).
18. *Student Centered Pedagogy* – classroom practices that prioritize student choice and student-led curriculum, often decentering the student/teacher binary.
19. *Student/Teacher Rapport* – the professional relationship between student and teacher involving trust, constructive/productive conversation, and appropriate openness in sharing for class/assignment purposes.

Theoretical Perspectives and Frameworks

There is a strong need for students to be given more writing experiences that employ feedback from peers and instructor, to help students express what they are learning, feeling, and experiencing as well as to generate a life-long writing culture for students to explore (Kaya & Ates, 2016). Various forms of writing need to be so engrained into curriculum that it organically becomes an enjoyable habit or default for students to express themselves productively through writing. Even in school, student writing should consist of "telling about emotions, thoughts, desires, and dreams, that is, all phenomena that is related to human beings' emotional and mental worlds" (Pilav, 2014, p. 86). No subject relevant to the human condition should be restricted in terms of writing content. Humans are "organisms [with] complex adaptive systems constantly in dynamic commerce with their conditions of existence" (Walsh, 2023, p. 273). Student writing needs to reflect their individual complexities and, therefore, they need to be taught the tools for

creative nonfiction writing in order to convey their lived experiences in this manner. The theoretical framework supporting this conception include Social Cognitive Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Expressivism (all of which will be more thoroughly explained in chapter 2).

Social Cognitive Theory

People are neither completely independent of their environment nor wholly controlled by it. Rather, individuals "make causal contribution[s] to their own motivation and action within a system of […] reciprocal causation" (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175). We act within a world embodied by others, often reacting to the actions of those embodied individuals, which then in turn necessitates even more actions, and so forth as a natural cycle of living in society. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) asserts that individuals are "interactive and responsive to their individual needs and contexts using three models of agency: personal agency, reflective of the individual, proxy agency, in which outcomes are influenced by others to act, and collective agency in which people collectively engage to act and shape their future" (Vaughn, et al., 2020, p. 535). Even those experiencing various levels of oppression, subject to the social forces at play, form paradigms that organically facilitate varied demonstrations of agency, some from instinctual survival tendencies and others born from learning to navigate the society in which they inhabit.

The oppressed tend to be hyperaware of their individual needs while participating in their respective communities, contributing to an involuntary survival instinct. Through this cognizance of reality, "individual subjectivity [emerges] through the articulation of collective experience and identity" (Bejarno as cited in Noriega and Belcher 2004, p.vii). The involuntary act of self-reflection "is impossible to achieve without considering one's own communal relations"

(Villanueva, 2013, p. 25). There is even research to suggest that personal narrative writing promotes disadvantaged students in particular, to be able to make sense of their communal marginalization and voice their lived experiences (Shay & Wickes, 2017, p. 110). Much like my undervalued pennies, when given the chance each story from each person, regardless of social demographic, brings good into the world and enlightenment to communities. Through writing their stories, underserved and underrepresented students learn how to make sense of their environment and how it is shaping their paradigms.

Self-Determination Theory

Regardless of our upbringing, demographics, and communal situations, we make choices that shape our perspectives, including how we frame and make meaning of that which is out of our control. Self-Determination Theory (SDT), is "grounded in the belief that all learners require autonomy [… and] freedom [in] student-centered learning" (Maydew, 2025, p. 1), because autonomy is determinant of human flourishing. Simply put, the more a person makes decisions for themselves, the more they will thrive. It goes deeper than that; while SDT attempts to explain the very human requirement of autonomy, it also informs the meaning making process. In reference to the events of our lives, we decide what they mean and how we will feel and think about them. We are in charge of our own understandings and how we choose to frame them. "Self-Determination Theory reminds us […of the needed] balance [in education] where structure and autonomy meet" (Maydew, 2025, p. 5). Regardless of educator intention and planning, there needs to be room for students to exercise their autonomy, and express that autonomy. With personal narrative writing, students manifest autonomy in how they express their lived experiences: the meaning they make of them and how they choose to frame that meaning for readers.

Expressivism

The underlying principles behind both SCT and SDT can be captured in the philosophies of Expressivism because "expressive discourse is" both an "individual […and] a social function" that overall "places the writer at the center of its theory and pedagogy, assigning highest value to the writer's imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development and how that development influences individual consciousness and social behavior" (Burnam & Powell, 2014, pp. 113 & 115). Expressivism demands that we broaden our scope from reflective, writer-centered writing to descriptive, reader-centered writing – allowing readers the potential to *feel* their own significant meanings from the writing. Expressivism is concerned with "the writer's relationships with audience, context, and subject," through reflection, meaning making, and communication (Burnam & Powell, 2014, pp. 120 &124). The writing is not in pursuit of correctness, but rather becomes a journey of meaning making through expression.

Methodology

In arts-based research (ABR) we facilitate learning experiences through a chosen artistic medium, then explore the meanings of what is created in the process. ABR does not seek concrete certainty; rather, it seeks to "foster the transformation of world views" through aesthetic exploration (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 27). Arts-based researchers "seek to bridge and not divide both the artistic-self and the researcher-self with the researcher and audience and researcher and teacher" (Leavy, 2020, p. 3). In ABR the researcher integrates their personal experiences aesthetically into the research findings and analysis (Atkins, 2012, p. 64). Therefore, the researcher and participants choreograph a type of dance of artistic expression in "an effort to extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 1). In this collaborative artistic

exploration of learning, ABR "represents an effort to explore the potentialities of an approach to representation that is rooted in aesthetic considerations and that, when it is at its best, culminates in the creation of something close to a work of art" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 1). In ABR we do not need to finalize our understanding of the meaning that is made, simply to appreciate the art and the journey and the potentially perpetually evolving meanings therein.

In fact, a more accurate label for ABR would be that it is a *practice*, not a *methodology* (Sinner, et al., 2006). There are demands in ABR for the researcher to be flexible, creative, open, intuitive, and proficient at storytelling (Saldana, 1999), particularly in dissertations because they are "different in form and content from traditional qualitative dissertations" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1230). ABR practice searches to generate, understand, and convey meaning through aesthetic expression, a vastly different concept than collecting data in more traditional methodology formats. Thusly, "arts-based research methodologies are […] in conflict with conservative scholarly and political climates that emphasize traditional, scientific definitions of research" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 7). ABR can do what traditional scholarship cannot. The goal in ABR is to "speak to diverse audiences both within and outside the academy. The use of accessible, vernacular, and aesthetic language and image, helps to explicitly reach out to larger, more diverse audiences" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 9), opening up "truly dialogical conversation[s] about educational possibilities" (Eisner, 2012, p. 44). ABR expands possibilities and audiences, thus also increasing its usefulness.

ABR is not supplementary; "we do not wish to conceive of arts based research as something one must do in addition to doing conventional research. Arts based research is an approach to research that exploits the capacities of expressive form to capture qualities of life that impact what we know and how we live […and] such contributions [can be found] in the

expressive use of narrative" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 5). The artistically represented findings and analysis stand alone in ABR, untethered by coding, graphs, or other means of traditional research. In ABR we attempt to broaden "our conception of the ways in which we come to know. We are trying to open up through this work a new vision of what the arts are about and what educational research can become" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 4).

There is a need for more research regarding the impact creative nonfiction writing instruction in secondary ELA classrooms. There are excellent texts for instructing creative writing, such as *Compose Our World* (Boardman, A.G., Dalton, B., & Polman, J.L, 2020), and *The Practice of Creative Writing* (Sellers, 2021). However, in the current data driven educational culture the emphasis weighs heavily on reading (scores), STEM, and highly visual and/or performative projects. Therefore, since creative nonfiction writing falls squarely into an artistic category, is a neglected field within ELA secondary studies, and inherently involves aesthetic exploration between teacher and student, Arts-Based Research (ABR) is the practice (or methodology) most appropriate for this project.

Practice

In this arts-based research I examine how secondary students engage with and represent their lived experiences during creative nonfiction writing instruction and how they describe the impact of creative nonfiction instruction on their sense of voice as writers. Combining ABR with personal narrative writing is uniquely appropriate for the scope of this study because it "allow[s] for understanding identities" and meaning making of lived experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 95). Students were asked to interrogate their perspectives and their lived realities in a way that helped them relay their experiences and understandings by creative means, with attention to creative writing skills while being mindful of audience. Mingling with their expressions of

meaning, I applied a reader response analysis lens. That is to say, reader response "engages with the text affectively, focusing on the pleasure and satisfaction of reading" (Momeni, 2026, pp. 2-3), based on the subjectivities and aesthetic of the reader as context. That is, I, as the reader of their writing, allowed my personal connection with the writing to influence my meaning making of the text and the experiences conveyed. Therefore, the parameters of this project were to practice arts-based research, from a constructivist perspective, using a reader response analysis lens.

Though it will be thoroughly explained in chapter 3, to simplify, I was the visiting instructor for the junior cohort at a local high school for 2 weeks with focused emphasis on creative nonfiction, personal narrative writing, using a variety of student-centered pedagogical approaches. During that time, I also participated in creative nonfiction writing as the participant researcher. The student writing samples were evaluated for aesthetic appeal and application of the taught tenets of creative writing. There was ample instruction, collaboration, constructive feedback to guide revision, and an opportunity to revise. After the planned weeks were concluded, I conducted semi-structured interviews with volunteer participants about their experience learning creative nonfiction writing skills as well as how their practice did or did not influence their meaning making and sense of writing voice. In an effort to give everyone the opportunity to speak, I also administered a questionnaire on the last day of the study so that even those not interviewed could express themselves about this experience. For the arts-based presentation of the findings and analysis, at the conclusion of the study, I crafted a creative nonfiction account of my experiences executing the study that incorporates excerpts from student writing and direct quotes from interviews.

The nonfiction creative writing lessons and accompanying assignments focused on creative prose, i.e. characterization through dialogue, close point of view (POV), pacing, show don't tell, tone, collaboration/feedback, and revision (see chapter 3 and Appendices A-I for more detailed information). The classroom prompts were handwritten by the students and focused on applying these tenets to writing about a moment from their lived experiences. They then culminated these writing exercises into a typed first draft, after which they received ample feedback and were instructed to revise and submit a final draft. These writing samples (the handwritten exercises, typed first drafts, and revised drafts), along with the interviews, questionnaires, and my field research journal serve as the data instruments.

The representation of the findings is interwoven with my reader response analysis of it, in the form of my own personal narrative account of the experience. I make connections between the creative writing tenets covered in the lessons, student applications of it, the perceived expressivism meaning from their writing, and my own personal experiences.

Subjectivity Statement

I grew up in the impoverished ghetto of Baytown, Texas, south of Houston. My community was comprised of mostly black and brown families, many of which found creative and less legal ways to make ends meet. Exposure to drugs and violence in my community did not account for my worst experiences in that town and neighborhood. All eight people in my immediate family lived in a two bedroom and one bathroom rusted, rodent and roach infested trailer that sheltered us from many coastal storms, regardless of the leaky roof. The food insecurity we experienced was severe. My growing up situation sounds extreme, and I suppose it was. In looking back, I just wanted to be treated like a normal kid. I wanted to *be* a normal kid. Requesting normality was asking for too much.

By the time I reached my adolescence I had a solid chip on my shoulder, bitter at people for having more than me. For being smarter than me and prettier than me. For having people in their lives that liked them. For being loved.

When I was fifteen years old, we moved into the nicest home that I had ever experienced; we didn't hold onto it for long. With just me and my parents left, everyone else had grown up and moved on, we were able to rent a condo in Texas City. Shortly after moving there, I became very ill and weak. I was diagnosed with a rare blood condition that left me on the verge of death. I needed frequent blood tests, doctor visits, and ultimately serious surgery. Just a month after being released from the hospital, my father passed away. My mother and I were then displaced, not being able to continue to pay for that condo anymore. Back to the ghetto, we found ourselves sharing a small one-bedroom apartment.

I had missed so much school that I was told I would have to repeat my junior year of high school. I was so mentally and emotionally demolished by that point that I really didn't think that I *could*. So, I dropped out of high school.

I was sixteen years old.

When I was healthy enough to walk around the community, by the time I was seventeen, I got every job that I could that was within walking distance and would hire me. There was a period of time when I worked three jobs at once. I was never without a job because I never wanted to go hungry again. I worked hard, went to college, traveled, and eventually clawed my way out of poverty.

This telling of my growing up years is a very sanitized, watered down version of my backstory. I relay it here because I know that the youth of America experience serious and very grown-up problems. I know this because I *remember*.

In my research I want to honor the lived experiences that youth are willing to share, perhaps even need to share. I want to teach secondary students *how* to voice their valid and important lived experiences. I know what it is like to be silenced because of my socioeconomic status and I am positive that my students have similar feelings based on their own situations and experiences. I am tired of youth being too heavily influenced by overbearing authority figures (media included), that dictate to them what their stories are. It is time we let them explore and speak for themselves.

I am now a secondary ELA instructor as well as a professor of English composition, creative writing, and literature at the post-secondary level. I teach students from diverse backgrounds, socioeconomic situations, and abilities. Some of my students have learning or physical disabilities. Some of my students are international students and the language barrier is very difficult. Some of my students come from extreme economic disadvantages. Though I come from my own version of similar and dissimilar circumstances as my students do, my personal objective is to *understand*, to enable student voice and to understand that voice. Or, at least, to do my best as a fellow human being with my own lived experiences and perspective.

I tried to build connections between the reality of those being researched with my own reality as well as respect disconnections that arose. I realize that "to understand" is accompanied by "to interrogate" and "to deconstruct" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p.19). Through the various interactions and feedback during the study, I tried to inspire the students to interrogate, deconstruct, and understand their own experiences they chose to share. My objective was to understand and to help them recognize and voice their own understanding as well, through creative nonfiction writing practices.

Limits and Possibilities of the Study

As I acknowledge the components of autonomous learning, and the concept of autonomy, I must also acknowledge that by giving writing assignments, regardless of intent, the component of autonomy is somewhat complicated or challenged. While I gave full marks for engaging with the tasks, the other side of that is that I needed to also give scores accordingly for tasks that students chose not to engage with. The grade concept was decentered while still holding students accountable for their participation and engagement, which was holistically evaluated.

The study is limited in that it did not examine how or if this creative nonfiction writing instruction and project would or would not influence the other facets of the students' academics. While there is research to support the likely connection between more writing instruction and practice improving overall student performance across academic disciplines (Graham, 2014; Ash et al. 2021), this study did not gather data to either confirm or refute such claims.

The possibilities of this study making a difference in the development of student voice could positively influence future educators and students alike. Furthermore, I hope that it will shed light on the experience and perspective of today's youth. This arts-based research project lets students speak for themselves, without me or any other adult telling them what they think or see or feel, as all people should be allowed though many youths are denied.

Summary

In an effort to honor the voices and lived experiences of secondary English language arts students, this arts-based research taught students creative nonfiction writing skills to empower them as agents who speak for themselves. Too often, youth and children are told what to think or feel or see whether or not those directives actually match their lived experiences. I taught my students how to build their creative writing voices to more effectively convey their lived

experiences in a way that honors their realty. We were collaborators, drafting a creative compilation of their lived experiences with mine.

Organization of the Study

Chapter One explains personal narrative writing's place within creative nonfiction and provides an introduction to creative nonfiction's importance within autonomous learning and pedagogy. Key definitions are explained in the theory, methodology, and overall concepts that need to be understood in the study. The research questions, subjectivity statement, and limits of the study are also provided.

Chapter two is a literature review of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the study. Supporting theories explained by the literature include Social Cognitive Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Expressivism. Concepts are covered in the literature review that include personal narrative writing, autonomous learning, arts-based research, and creative writing pedagogy.

Chapter three explores Arts-Based Research more fully as a practice or methodology and how it manifests within this study, including an exploration of art-based research formatting and scholarship expectations. The lessons in the study are more fully explained as well as feedback concepts. The research design is explained including researcher participant's positionality, description of the subjects, sampling, trustworthiness/reliability of the study, data generation, and reader response analysis woven into the findings presentation.

Chapter four is my presentation of the findings through the medium of my own creative nonfiction writing of the experiences executing this study and the meaning (readers response analysis) I made of them. Each phase of the study is represented within the story, including

excerpts from lessons, student writing samples, and interviews. Analysis of the findings is interwoven throughout the piece.

Chapter five discusses overviews of the findings and analysis (those included and not included in chapter 4), bigger implications, and future potential for the research. There is also a brief exploration on the import of narrative voice development considering the overwhelming advent of artificial intelligence in learning spaces, in the conclusion.

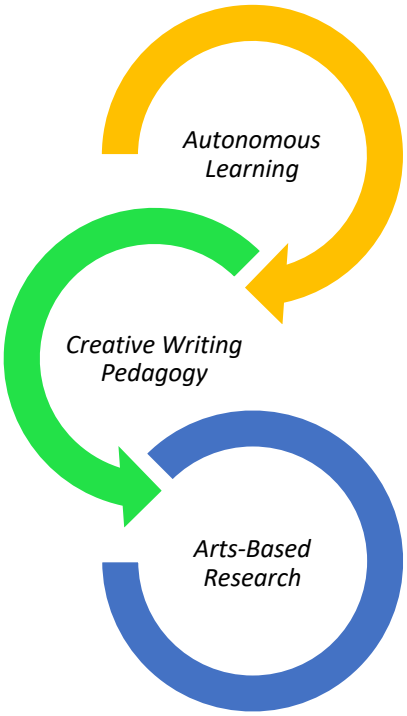
Chapter 2 - Literature Review: Theories and Conceptual Framework

Personal narrative writing quintessentially acts to capture one's story and make sense of one's lived experiences. When we write narratives, we stretch our imaginations in the ways we describe people, setting, and events, in the way we understand what happened. Narrative imagination, therefore, is "a form and practice of human agency" (Brockmeier, 2009, p. 227). Narrative is the representation of events consisting of story and narrative discourse. Story is an event or sequence of events (in action) and narrative discourse is the product of those represented events (Walker, 2018, p. 38). To clarify the difference between creative nonfiction writing and personal narrative writing, as discussed in chapter 1, creative nonfiction writing is the capture of true events in writing with foci placed on aesthetic skill and audience; personal narrative writing narrows the scope to specifically be about a life experience of the author while also incorporating the tenets of creative nonfiction writing. The terms creative nonfiction writing and personal narrative writing are not exactly the same; the latter is a component of the former (see Figure 1.1). In this study, students learned creative writing skills and applied them to their personal narrative writing.

Despite the import of personal narrative writing, ELA curriculum does not often make room for creative writing instruction (Hellmann, 2024), meaning that essential conventions in creative writing skills that could add breadth and depth to telling a person's story are often excluded (Ash et al., 2021). Students' lived experiences, identities, and paradigms intersect as part of the human condition and we need to shift the typical power structure that erases students' control over their personal stories; we need to view students as authors (Williams, 2001). "English language arts classrooms are at a specific advantage in authentic [meaning] making [of

lived experiences] because so often classroom practices focus on developing expressive products through forms of communication that are beautiful, elegant, and compelling" (Polman et al., 2021, p. 14). In keeping with the inherent nature of aesthetic communication in the humanities, the guiding principle of this study and dissertation is the assertion that educators need to let students speak for themselves, including the need to teach them effective ways of speaking for themselves through learning the art of creative prose. While verbal communication serves an extremely important role in oracy skills and meaning making, and it will be touched on later, in this study the main focus is on communication through creative writing. As such this chapter reviewing relevant literature is divided into three main sections: autonomous learning in relation to narrative writing, creative writing/narrative writing pedagogy as it pertains to the development of student voice in autonomous learning, and arts-based research for qualitative meaning making in this study (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. *Literature Review Themes*



Within the autonomous learning category, we will discuss theories supporting and fostering student agency and the significance of creative writing within autonomous learning with particular attention to creative nonfiction personal narrative writing. Within the creative writing pedagogy section, we will discuss best practices of instructional models and expectations from a student-centered structure of learning creative writing skills. In the arts-based research section we will examine the method of arts-based research pertaining to creative nonfiction writing, how it connects with creative writing instruction, and how it best honors the lived experiences captured in student narrative writing.

Autonomous Learning

Theoretical Frameworks for Personal Narrative within Autonomous Learning

This study was accomplished with respect to students' lived experiences through a multifaceted understanding of autonomy and the deconstruction of the power dynamic between student and teacher, centralizing the student. Each student has a unique and valid story to tell – the story of themselves; teachers need not muddy it with overbearing influence. Teachers, in turn, have their own stories to tell and need to do little more than participate in the classroom writing community, offering guiding feedback when needed to help develop effective student voice – not sway their students' ideologically. "The self, one of life's more intricate sets of meanings, is itself a story" (Taylor, 1989). Intentional exploration of self leads us into the theoretical framework this study is based on, encompassing theories of Social Cognitive Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Expressivism – all informing this constructivist arts-based research project (Figure 2.2).

Through a constructivist perspective we understand that the "researcher and the participant [will be] in an interpretive exchange where neither enters the research space without

the influence of the world, their individual histories, beliefs, assumptions, informing the meanings they make of each other, [and] their experiences outside and within the research space" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 105). While I and my students made meaning of our respective experiences within this research study, so much depended upon the students' own drive for fulfillment and wisdom seeking through subjective interpretations of their actions, needs, and actualization (Bauer, 2018).

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), represents "*well-being as fulfillment-based meaningfulness* […] and *wisdom as structural perspectivity of meaning making* [… which] emerge from, respectively, the subjective content and objective structure of narrative meaning making" (Bauer, 2018, p. 82). Whether in communal or agentic themes, SDT emphasizes the meaning making process in the telling of one's story. "Narratives of life experience […] allows for the study of how people integrate (or do not integrate) their actions with a broader understanding of self-identity" (Bauer, 2018, p. 89). To narrate one's life is to make sense of lived events, or even at minimum the absence of understanding is identified and named. "Facts, as putatively objective descriptions of someone or of someone's life, do not require a story. But to make sense of facts, one must evaluate them and situate them within a context of meaning. To do this, people use narrative thinking" (Bauer, 2018, p. 88). We perpetually tell ourselves stories as we attempt to make sense of our realities and that very act of capturing meaning, even if only within our minds, is the essence of SDT. "Much of human flourishing rests on the satisfaction of SDT's three psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy" (Bauer, 2018, p. 83). SDT means that we learn, we connect, and we act – we choose our understandings and our paths. Through this narrative thinking of one's life, agentic practices recognize in reality what

SDT captures philosophically: self-sovereignty. As we practice autonomy, we are better able to interact with and make sense of the world and people around us.

Social Cognitive Theory

Through the philosophy of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), we understand the assertion that individual perspectives are made up of collective contexts including multiple subjectivities and outside influences (Bandura, 1989). "Persons are neither autonomous agents nor simply mechanical conveyers of animating environmental influences. Rather they make causal contribution to their own motivation and action" (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175). Our perception of our place within the world is infused into understanding our experiences. Writing these experiences "encourages selectivity, […] multiple interpretations, future orientation, and agency in representation" (Mack, 2015, p. 59). This is to be encouraged because our experiences juxtaposed with those of our fellow human counterparts is a natural component of the human condition, adding meaning to our existence and to theirs. Simply put, "where there is meaning in a person's life, there is a story" (Bauer, 2018, p. 88), and where there is a relationship between individuals there is inherent meaning.

Expressivism

In the quest for capturing autonomy and meaning through narrative writing philosophies of expressivism are useful insomuch that it encourages writers to make sense of their histories and understandings. "Expressivism places the writer in the center, articulates its theory, and develops its pedagogical system by assigning highest value to the writer and her imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development and how that development influences individual consciousness and social behavior" (Burnam, 2001, p. 19). Unfortunately, not all academic circles acknowledge the vast import of personal expression in meaning making. In recent years,

"proponents of the personal essay [have been labeled] as naïve, as blind to the situated, social, ideological nature of language use" (Newkirk, 2015, p. 35). The inference here is that teachers are somehow troubled in a search "for an essential, pre-social 'self,' for a language that is 'free,' for a 'voice' that is unique [and some] argue that the 'self' of expressivist pedagogy is a social construction, constituted by language and culture" (Newkirk, 2015, p. 35). However, we learn from psychologists, authors, and philosophers (i.e. Montaigne, Lopate, Elbow, and James), that the institution of the narrative essay is a "fine vehicle for exploring the multiplicity, fragmentation, and constructedness of the 'self'" (Newkirk, 2015, p. 39). In addition to making meaning of the self, "expressivist practices have always been about complex negotiations between self and other, and the dismantling of the 'public'/'private' binary that still seems to too often haunt our conversations about writing and pedagogy" (Roeder et al., 2015, p. 8). We do this through practices involving "freewriting, peer response, and revision. Freewriting helps students discover ideas, and peer response groups allow writers to test their writing on an actual audience and revise on the basis of that response" (Burnham & Powell, 2014, p. 114). Moreover, as we examine exchanges with others we come to better understand ourselves and *they*, therefore, are intricately woven into our own personal stories.

These three theories: Self-Determination Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Expressivism work together, each one informing the other. Self-Determination Theory explores a person's understanding of themselves in relation to their choices and the understanding they tack onto their life experiences. Social Cognitive Theory interrogates how one's understanding of lived events is influenced and built through various social means. Expressivism captures all of it in how people describe their experiences and the meanings they make of them. Weaving these three theories together comprise a solid foundation for the agentive writer.

Figure 2.2 *Theoretical Framework*



Narrative Writing's Place Within Autonomous Learning

Agentive Discourse

Our inherent search for autonomy within a social world that requests our participation with fellow humans can be described as agentive discourse. "The study of human agency cannot be separated from the study of the language of agency" known as "agentive discourse" which is "the discursive practices in which our agentive powers are manifested […] in which we present ourselves as agents" (Harre as cited in Brockmeier, 2009, p. 224), through the communicative practices of writing, reading, speaking, and listening. Our agentive powers make up "the content of action [which] is under the sway of intentional states, such as beliefs, desires, emotions, and moral commitments, states which in turn are interwoven with culture, society, and history" (Vaugn, 2024, p. 219). The human condition is comprised of such a vast array of functions and influences, all of which we are subject to. Humans are "organisms [with] complex adaptive systems constantly in dynamic commerce with their conditions of existence" (Walsh, 2023, p. 273). That push and pull between acting and being acted upon, then acting again – as agents in a transactional life instills a vast spectrum of adaptations in our existence. Therefore, "agentive discourse […describes the] vehicle by which we navigate the extended space of our 'possibility

of relationship' to the world and ourselves" (Brockmeier, 2009, p. 226). Personal narrative writing, informed by creative writing pedagogy, facilitates agentive discourse within the classroom.

Personal Narrative Writing

Though some equate any form of storytelling with the term "narrative," and that would be correct, personal narratives are nonfiction storytelling written from the author's perspective, emotions, and lived reality (MacDonnchaidh, 2021). Humans and the human condition are so very complex. As we attempt to make meaning out of these complexities, we tend to acquire a wiser understanding of our existence and lived experiences. "Wisdom is likely to be found in […] twin mechanisms of cognitive development: assimilation and accommodation. Such [narratives feature] explicit exploration, struggle, questioning, consideration of alternative perspectives on a life problem […] and the reconstruction of previous meanings of one's life" (Bauer, 2018, p. 89). Narrative concepts, established both in and outside of literacy disciplines, "are tenuously established […and] constitute the backbone of the interdisciplinary study of culture – primarily because of their potential *intersubjectivity*. Not because they mean the same thing for everyone, but because they don't" (Bal as cited in Heinen, 2009, pp. 207-208). Narrative helps us navigate the complexities of our fluid understandings and social world.

We learn as we reflect on our experiences and what we learn will change through time as we continue to practice reflection, narrating the moments of our lives. As concepts of narrative writing remain "elastic" (Heinen, 2009, p. 207), narratives offer tools for "constructing and cultivating the experiential and reflective facets of wisdom" when they allow for "wise reflections both on one's own lived experiences and on hypothetical situations" (Bauer, 2018, 93). Eudaimonic themes center on well-being and flourishing, or story arcs in which one arrives

at a place of thriving or peace. “From a narrative perspective, a life story conveys wisdom when the story features eudaimonic, humanistic themes […] with a complex and coherent narrative structure […]. If wisdom is constructed in narratives, then narratives must offer tools for” discovering such wisdom (Bauer, 2018, 93). It is the natural quest of one writing their story: to make sense of what happened in a way that frames how the experience helped shape them for the better. It is almost involuntary, to seek such meaning and/or to gain power over a moment of fragility, when one is writing a narrative from their life.

There are so much cognitive development and agential power to be gained from personal narrative writing. “For narrative discourse, accumulated research evidence suggests that children may have well-developed schemata of what constitutes a story […]. Such learning possibly accrues from frequent exposure to narratives in listening, speaking, and reading situations” (Gordon, et al., 1985, p. 18). We discover ourselves, really, when called upon to capture ourselves on the page. When we know ourselves better, we also know our fellow humans better. "When we understand the processes by which a life [...] takes on its particular character, we understand something of value" (Peshkin, 2017, p. 24).

Autonomy and Narrative Connection

Autonomy and narrative writing collide on a fundamental level. For, in our writing we capture our lived experiences, yes, but only as we choose to understand and portray them. Thus, we exercise choice even over events that we possibly had little or no control over when they originally took place. “Narrative imagination is pivotal in probing and extending real and fictive scenarios of agency” (Vaugn, 2024, p. 215). It gives us choice over how we see our lives; it lets us articulate that choice and expand our understanding through exploration of words to capture meaning making. “All languages provide a rich and differentiated vocabulary for such acts of

positioning which allow people to constitute themselves as agents with respect to the conventions and narrative models of agency made available by their culture" (Brockmeier, 2009, p. 225). Yes, we are made up in large part by the home and community environments wherein we were born and raised – fostering so much of our subjectivities. Even still, it is "important to investigate the ways human beings construct their real and possible worlds" (Vaugn, 2024 p. 214), through "narrative [which] exponentially expands the reach of human meanings and thus of possibilities for action" (Brockmeier, 2009, p. 226). For, what is agency if not the ability to act, regardless of environs?

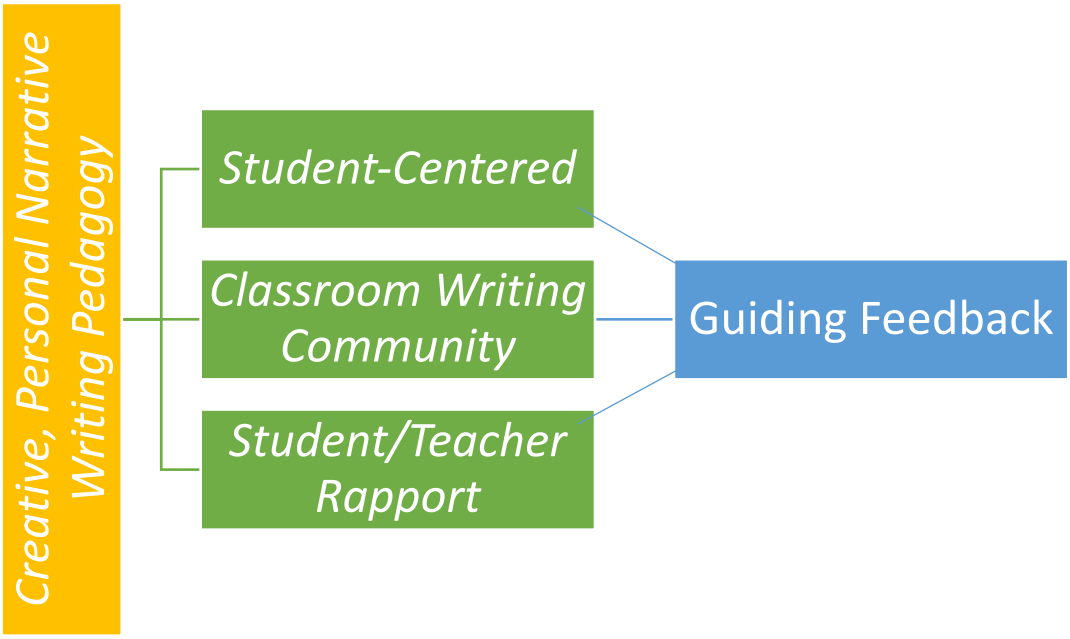
Agency represents the self as a chooser and narrative represents the choices made as an autonomous human being. "The self in the long view is an autobiographical life story of the narrator over time, complete with actions, motives, values, intentions, characters and positioning among them, evaluations of good and bad, themes, scripts, structure, and many other elements of narration" (McAdams, 1985). Narrating one's agency intrinsically displays "the agentive dimension of human subjectivity, […] individual within societal synthesis, […] and "determinant of activity" for human action (Brockmeier, 2009, pp. 218-222). Life is not static – we grow, we learn, we experience, we regress, we mourn, we reflect, we celebrate. We cannot begin to comprehend myriads of ups and downs, of accomplishments and trials in this life unless we at least attempt to capture these moments with language. By so doing, we enable agency over our life events. It is incumbent upon educators to include personal narrative writing curriculum in ELA classrooms because it makes sense and because it is quintessential in autonomous learning.

Nonfiction Creative Writing Pedagogy

In this literature review examining creative nonfiction writing pedagogy, specifically as it pertains to personal narrative writing, we will focus on three specific categories of inquiry that

serve as underlying pedagogical philosophies: student/teacher rapport, classroom writing community, and a student-centered approach to creative writing instruction, all of which connect with guiding feedback (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3. *Interpersonal Tenets of Creative, Personal Narrative Writing Pedagogy*



Student-Centered Approach

Facilitating the practice of personal narrative writing by teaching creative nonfiction writing skills connects "tasks that are authentic to students' lives and stories […] in order to support students in understanding disciplinary skills relevant to their own experiences" (Polman et al., 2021, p. 16). Students have expressed that creative nonfiction curriculum offers authentic learning possibilities that keep them engaged while learning literacy (Polman et al., 2021, p. 16). Simply put, "individuals bring in and reimagine their lived experiences in ELA classrooms in ways that shape learning and teaching, regardless of whether they are [overtly] addressed" (Guggenheim, et al., 2021, p. 72). Creative writing curriculum makes learning very individualized and personal because integrating agency through creative personal narrative

writing in the classroom invites "students' voices, histories, languages, and interests into the curriculum" (Vaugn, 2024, p. 222).

There may not be a more comprehensive channel for student-centered, autonomous, curriculum than in teaching students how to capture their lived experiences in writing and to make connections with other's lived experiences through dialogue about what they read. In so doing, we are "redefining authenticity from the perspective of the learner so that greater levels of authenticity are defined by greater levels of personal agency and meaning" (Polman et al., 2021, p. 16). By fully handing over the content to learners' creative minds we are "orienting language arts instruction that privileges student agency [which] views students and families as knowledge generators and resources that are valuable and essential to student learning" (Vaugn, 2024, p. 222). Not just writing their experiences as they make sense of them, but also the dialogue around reading good literature that helps them better be able to capture their memories. "Although 'Write what you know' centers reflective powers on personal writing, 'Write what you read' focuses analysis on the writing of others, its possible translation into personal authorship, and the role of critical response to one's own writing" (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994, p. 427). Numerous children's authors, suggest to "'Write what you read,' implying that writers are often inspired by what they know about literature. The writer studies literature, not the world. He lives in the world; he cannot miss it" (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994, p. 427). We thusly begin to discuss how creative nonfiction writing learning is a multi-layered process.

Teaching elements of narrative writing in compartmentalized segments, to then combine into a "panoramic framework" (Tuchman, 2017, p. 55), can prove particularly effective with secondary learners. Students need an active role in the learning process (Tracey & Morrow, 2006, p. 47), that includes construction of goal making, project parameters, and measures of

assessment. Oladontun et al. (2020) observe that process-based narrative instruction exposes students to more language and has positive impact on writing skills in general. Building on the connection between reading and writing better facilitates this process. “Narratives are taught in both reading and writing skills” (Oladontun, et al., 2020, p. 103). Furthermore, “current trends in pedagogy have shown that the teaching of narrative essay in schools has become [recognized as] more learner-centric” (Oladontun, et al., 2020, p. 101). It approaches more of the learners’ whole self by encompassing the absorption of material, comprehension of it, and expression of that comprehension.

An integral component throughout the process is guiding feedback from peers and instructor which can be “a meaningful challenge [for which] students’ engagement and […] production, [facilitating more quality] work from the beginning of the project” (Polman et al., 2021, p. 15). Poleman (2021) calls this “wise feedback” in that the feedback focuses on helping students further develop their thoughts in reader-centered expression, instead of focusing on grammar and syntax; I often refer to this concept as guiding feedback. In other words, “students need to receive more feedback they can understand, and they need to receive it throughout the learning process so they have opportunities to use the feedback to set goals and improve their work” (Baxa, 2015, p. 1686). The feedback needs to be “nondirective” in order to “return the responsibility for writing back to the student” (Burnham & Powell, 2014, p. 114), with guiding questions and impressions rather than explicit instruction about what to change. Upon receiving feedback, they need to be given time and space to absorb the meaning of the feedback and further develop their writing accordingly. By giving nondirective, guiding feedback with the opportunity to improve their work though revision, autonomy is again the underlying

pedagogical component. Students choose what to do with guiding feedback and how to revise (or not revise).

An effective process outline I developed (Figure 2.4), and the structure I utilized in my study here, begins with reading, followed by analysis, then instruction in creative writing skills

Figure 2.4. *Creative Writing Pedagogical Cycle*



that includes practicing and classroom collaboration. Once students submitted their creative personal narratives, I provided guiding feedback then allowed them opportunities for revision. The product culminated into an artistic representation that students were proud of and felt strong personal ownership of.

Classroom Writing Community

Students are better equipped to write important things, and write them well, if they are "given multiple opportunities to read and talk extensively and analytically about text" (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994, p. 428). There is a certain necessity of interactionism through "language, communication, interrelationships, and community [...] whereby we enter into the perceptions, attitudes, and values of a community, becoming persons in the process" (Crotty, 2015, pp. 7-8). Through this open exchange of ideas and personal stories, the classroom writing community is built with individuals willing to share pieces of themselves. "Vulnerability from both teachers and students can be essential in determining who shares stories, what stories are shared, and how those stories are shared" (Guggenheim, et al., 2021, p. 80). Indeed, the most effective and productive categories of "student talk include students building on the thinking of others, working together to improve the group's thinking, and listening closely to one another" (Boardman, 2021, p. 34). Just as individual thought and expression is the goal, building off of one another in a free exchange of ideas builds classroom community and helps students in the meaning making process.

Additionally, expressive and inclusive classroom communities regarding peoples' lived experiences have far reaching implications for equality in the classroom. "Building on the lived experiences as well as cultural, intellectual, and identity resources of students, while employing authentic disciplinary tools for meaningful purposes and community audiences, is a more effective and a more morally appropriate approach than disconnected curriculum" (Polman et al., 2021, p. 17). The more a student can share, and is lauded for doing so, the more students from underserved communities are included in the academic environment regardless of their demographic backgrounds.

Teachers need to instruct in the development of "interpretive dialogue" about the texts being examined (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994, p. 426). Typical practice that falls short is the commonality of excluding interactive analysis from text, "experiencing literature" without critiquing it as well as assigning narratives without providing analytical responses to the students' narratives (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994, p. 427). With this type of "analytic response to text" in classroom conversation "teachers and their children take on the roles of professional critics, readers, and writers, [and subsequently writing tends to] profit" (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994, p. 427). What will also be built is a type of rapport that encourages engagement and even caring between student and teacher as well as student peers.

Students do not develop writing in a vacuum, especially when trying to make sense of their lived reality. Speaking and listening, oracy, plays an integral role in creative nonfiction pedagogical practices. As Guggenheim et al. (2021) notes "engaging in a listening practice can lend itself to caring because it is a crucial ingredient in recognizing the emotional needs of others. By listening, we mean listening with careful attention not only to those who are talking but also to those who are silent" (p. 80). There are certain things that we can do, and did in this study, to better train students in oracy engagement. Desk arrangements, for example, should be planned intentionally for care, collaborative work, and so that students can engage meaningfully (Guggenheim, et al., 2021, pp. 80-81), such as in clusters. Conversation guides that include essential questions, is another important component to get students talking to each other. Conversation guides could be either projected on a board for all to see or distributed on paper; either way they contain open ended questions for students in each group to discuss regarding the material being presented. Above all, I have found that the training and preparation of the teacher,

their knowledge of this particular discipline, plays the strongest role in guiding both classroom participation and guiding feedback throughout the process.

When the teachers know more, and have experience in the content being presented to students, learning is accelerated and there is a more satisfying experience felt by all participating. The "emergence of [dialogical analysis of texts in…] classroom communities depends upon the content knowledge of teachers," and so we must "address first what teachers need to know" (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994, p. 437). The point is: teachers need to be trained in creative writing. Too often secondary ELA teachers have been well equipped with the art of teaching in general and as it pertains to grammar, essay construction, and meeting state required standards in general but, as is explained in chapter 1, their own creative writing skills are neglected in the process, which then projects onto their students. Teachers need to be trained in creative writing in college and they need to form communities of writers who workshop together after college. Teachers also need to participate in the writing process with their students, as I did in this study.

Student/Teacher Rapport

With social and emotional design principles incorporated into classroom culture, "teachers are aware of students' emotions and make connections to students. Connections are characterized by care and can connect to content or be separate from content. "Relationships matter. Practices that foster teacher-student connection and encourage self-determination must remain the foundation" in pedagogy (Maydew, 2025, p. 5). Teachers should "create opportunities for students to voice and reflect on how they are feeling in class. Teachers model voicing their own and others' social and emotional needs, and attending to these needs in class" (Guggenheim, et al., 2021, p. 74). Furthermore, dialogical exchanges include diversity of thought; i.e. "teacher and student respect one another's ideas, opinions, and backgrounds, listening to one another and

responding to one another's ideas" (Guggenheim, et al., 2021, p. 74). The teacher-student connection is made up of interpersonal exchanges and meaning-making interactions that must involve "trust, […] warmth, and low negativity […] from the teacher" (Samfira, et al., 2021, p. 2). In this way, there is focus put on purpose, genre, and audience (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994, p. 425), while also contributing to creative nonfiction writing curriculum.

Through a caring, respectful, and encouraging approach we attempt a reciprocal journey of meaning making with our lived experiences and every-day life. "Although ELA teachers and students typically have not been seen as 'makers,' [I] argue that this ethic fits the discipline: ELA teachers aim to educate students by supporting them in creating literacy-based products that exhibit specific literacy skills" (Polman et al., 2021, p. 14). A valid criticism of having students write personal essays is the "intrusive institutional power" involved; "the ways in which practitioners of the personal essay, while claiming to grant freedom to the writer, are imposing a set of values and expecting students to reveal insecurities, traumas, family difficulties, health issues, and personal details of their lives. No trauma, no good grade" (Newkirk, 2015, p. 35). However, if teachers set clear intentions at the onset and integrate developmental activities that include recalling happy experiences along with fun, playful writing development exercises, as this study aimed to accomplish, students may come to a more authentic narrative writing skill that is not necessarily grounded in trauma. "Tenets of authenticity [regarding every-day life] apply to students and teachers. […] Teachers caring about the projects that their students are working on – beyond the students' exemplifying mere evidence of ELA skill development – is just as important as connections with students" (Polman et al., 2021, p. 18). Therefore, when teachers focus on what some might call the mundane, or going back to my metaphor in chapter 1

– the students' pennies, students will pay attention to that as well, soaking up what author Ann Howard Creel (2001) exemplifies in *The Magic of Ordinary Days*.

The more the teachers are familiar with finding the extraordinary, by sucking "all of the marrow out of life" (Thoreau, 1854) - including in what they read, the more students will be inclined to see the opportunity in doing so as well. "When ELA teachers share their passions for composing and reading literature and media, students become even more inspired to find this kind of passion in their own writing" (Polman et al., 2021, p. 18). After all, "good teachers of [creative writing and] literature help children to make sense out of each literary experience and to go on to discover patterns and make significant connections" in their own creative writing (Sloan, 1991, pp. 39-40). Negative things happen in life; this is part of the human experience. Students need to be given the space to interrogate the negative, of course, but they also need to be given the freedom to focus on the good, too.

Just as the life takes twists and turns, so too does the nebulous understanding of our experiences. The meaning we make out of an event will change over time and maturity. We need to take such care with the feelings of our students; "addressing student and teacher emotions also means recognizing the political forces that shape these feelings" (Guggenheim, et al., 2021, p. 72). In order to tend to these emotions within classroom communities "students and teachers need opportunities to reflect and relate to collaborate; to express vulnerability, anger, excitement, love, and loss; and to build relationships that are based on mutual trust and an acknowledgement of power" (Guggenheim, et al., 2021, p. 75), within classroom discussions and the writing prompts given, and even the feedback provided for students on their writing. All of it needs to be centered on a caring and nurturing intention and structure.

With nurturing and care, we "believe that an ethos of trust and vulnerability has to start with us as teachers – if we are not willing to be vulnerable with and for our students, how can we expect them to do the same?" (Guggenheim, et al., 2021, p. 76). Productive feedback and dialogue mean that the interpersonal communication happening leads towards better, more exploratory writing – not necessarily only approval all of the time. "Loving our students 'doesn't mean we agree with them, condone their actions, or allow them to do things that hurt us, themselves, or others … loving others just means opening our hearts enough to see as clearly as we can without letting our own pains, hurt, and fears get in the way" (Orella, 2015, as cited in Guggenheim, et al., 2021, p. 77). Necessary mandatory reporting aside, students need to know that they will not be judged or condemned for their perspectives, preferences, ideologies, or choice of expression. Furthermore, even we teachers need to learn self-care techniques for our own healing and so that we are better "able to discuss […] self-care techniques with students in order to support students to do the same" (Guggenheim, et al., 2021, p. 74). By so doing we have credibility when called upon to deliver feedback that is constructive, that is not seen as a criticism of the student but as enabling specific writing development.

Feedback

As is more fully explored in chapter 3, guiding, not stifling, feedback makes all the difference in the development of student voice and expression. "When teachers give feedback effectively, students can become more confident and motivated to work because they see themselves growing and learning. […] Feedback that focuses on the process, the effort, or the strategy a student used can help students develop a growth mindset" (Baxa, 2015, p. 1685). Feedback needs to focus on helping students *think* and therefore expand their expressive practice. Often times "challenges of the feedback process include 'time, miscommunication and emotional

barriers'" (Carless, 2006, p. 220). However, with proper intention, training, and practice teachers can be better equipped to guide students towards a more fulfilling writing process and a more effective end product that honors student lived experiences.

There is an important focus on growth and improvement with valuable feedback that goes far beyond grammar and typo corrections. "Through effective, targeted […] wise feedback, all students can build their self-efficacy by knowing how to improve their work through guidance and support of their teachers" (Newton, 2022, p. 5). "Wise," or guiding feedback is feedback that encourages, asks students to look at their writing and ask themselves what they *mean* with gentle encouragement to dig deeper. "Current assessment practices often focus on grading and levels of proficiency rather than on providing feedback to students about how to improve. […However] effective feedback is descriptive, not judgmental, and informs students about how they can improve their work" (Baxa, 2015, 1686). When one is strapped for time, it is easy to fall into "rapid judgments and brief comments on children's writing, [but] a teacher's assessments need not be limited to convention or global reaction. Although it may seem efficient to write, 'Good job!' - or even accurate to write, 'Remember your capitals!' - such feedback does not provide the kinds of substantive assistance students need" to grow as writers (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994, p. 427). Guiding feedback specifically connects back to instructional moments and classroom content, giving "explicit examples from published stories, and/or the particular context of an individual child's writing accomplishments" (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994, p. 427). When students are given this type of helpful guidance on conceptual improvement on creative writing efficacy, teachers are building agency and metacognition in students who will then be encouraged to broaden their writing voice by channeling their particular meaning making process to focus on their words and overall messages to readers.

This push and pull between writing and feedback maintains the pillars of agentive discourse. "Opportunities for agency in classrooms draws attention to the power relations that occur daily between students and teachers and provides the potential for students to transform knowledge beyond the acquisition of isolated literacy skills" (Vaugn, 2024 p.224). Therefore, teachers need to facilitate time and space for practice during classroom moments "along with feedback between summative assessments so students develop the mindset and self-efficacy that is so important for learning" (Baxa, 2015, p. 1684). In so doing they facilitate the necessary student/teacher rapport required for a caring, student-centered writing community that nourishes individual growth.

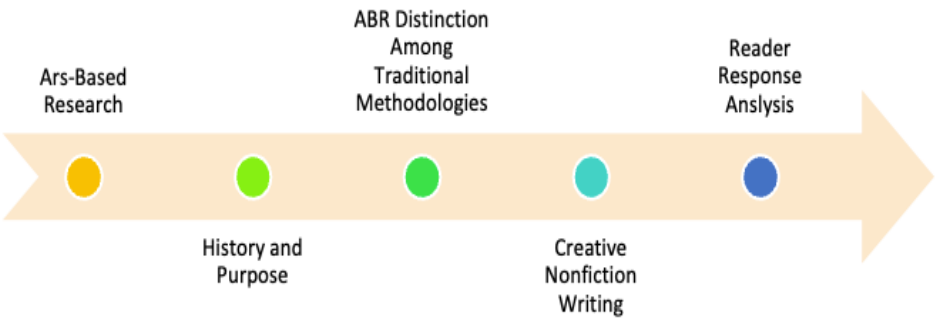
Arts-Based Research

Artistic expression uniquely conveys perspective of the human experience; Art-Based Research (ABR) attempts to understand meaning from that expression. "[M]atters of meaning are shaped – that is enhanced and constrained – by the tools we use" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 1), as in the mediums of art, skill of the artist, and the aesthetic lenses used to appreciate the art. "The arts typically project an image that reshapes our conception of some aspect of the world or sheds light on aspects of the world we had not seen before. Good [ABR] generalizes in such a fashion […] to *feel* the meanings that the work is to help readers grasp" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 152-153). Therein ABR is deeply about aesthetic explorations of social and educational issues that would otherwise not be accessible to the public in more "traditional forms of research" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 61). As such, the researcher needs to be proficient in the artistic medium chosen in ways that "entices a reader or viewer to reflect and to question" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 61), because ABR overlaps science and art in ways that honor "careful attention to the realm of human experience" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 46). This arts-based research

approach utilized the medium of creative nonfiction writing in order to "intersect the creative arts with qualitative research methods" as a way to generate an artistic rendering of the data and analysis, to "integrate scholarship, the creative arts, and research methodologies" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 29).

In this section of the literature review, we will discuss the history and purpose of arts-based research, its distinction among traditional methodologies, creative nonfiction writing as the chosen medium for this study, and the reader response analysis lens applied in this study (Figure 2.5). As we will explore, creative nonfiction writing is an important avenue in social research, is effectively manifested through ABR, and should be included in standard ELA pedagogy as it is key in autonomous learning.

Figure 2.5. *Creative Nonfiction in, Placement, and History of Arts-Based Research*



History and Purpose of Arts-Based Research, a Brief Overview

Qualitative, or inductive, research approaches are ethnographic and anthropologic across disciplines, having largely emerged from the University of Chicago in the 1920s (Leavy, 2020, p. 8). As Leavy (2020) explains, qualitative research gained ground with Erving Goffman's (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* in which he borrows Shakespeare's "all the world is a stage" and explains the concept of "front stage," "backstage," and "face-saving behavior." He

uses these terms to explain social behavior: what people need to keep hidden from others, what they want people to see, and how they act to try to recover social standing when they feel they have revealed part of the backstage, respectively. This type of qualitative research led to an arts-based research (ABR) approach and by the 1960s ABR became known as experimental literary neuroscience, uniquely valuable in teaching and researching social sciences (Leavy, 2020, p. 13). In the 1970s "educational researchers began using the practices of artists and arts critics to conduct educational research"; some examples include Eisner (1976); Greene (1975); Grumet (1978); Vallance (1977) (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1226). By the early 1990s, ABR developed into "a qualitative methodological genre, being broadly practiced in arts-based therapies" (Sinner et al., 2006, p. 1226).

At Stanford University in the early 1990s, professor Elliot Eisner began to "build on the discipline of art criticism to develop a new arts-based research methodology for conducting inquiry in the social sciences. This methodology […] was called educational criticism." (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, pp. 5-6). Then his graduate student, Tom Barone, further developed these concepts into a new arts-based methodology known as narrative story-telling. "Where educational criticism called on the researcher to function as a connoisseur to see deeply into a situation and to reveal details that the casual observer would miss, narrative storytelling [evolving] the researcher as a raconteur" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 6). By the mid-1990s ABR in education had broadened to include "narrative writing, autobiography, dance and movement, readers theatre, multi-media, hypertext, visual arts, photography, music, poetry, and creative non-fiction" along with other art forms (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1226). Other names for arts-based research began to sometimes be mentioned as "blurred genres," "arts-based inquiry," "scholARTistry," and "a/r/tography" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 6).

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, a collection of ABR dissertations arose "incorporating the literary arts, form[ing] the first pillar of arts-based practice within the faculty. These dissertations began with a particular methodological lens of narrative inquiry and creatively used the literary arts of poetry, fiction, drama, life-writing, and creative non-fiction to research complex lived experiences in innovative ways" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1230). Rather than being limited to art as an "object of study," art became a recognized form of inquiry in academic settings (Sinner, et al. 2006). Now, ABR resides as a type of mediator between social science and art (Bochner, et al. 2020). Bringing awareness to important social and educational issues, ABR attempts to "advance critical conversations about the nature of social-scientific practice and expands the borders of our methods arsenal" (Leavy, 2020, pp. 12-13), via artistic expression.

Criticism of ABR stems from reliance on previous knowledge and measurement indicators however, in qualitative research we need to be open to aesthetic means of knowing. Eisner (1997), posits that there is a concretizement of "our view of what it means to know. We prefer our knowledge solid and like our data hard. It makes for a firm foundation, a secure place on which to stand. Knowledge as a process, a temporary state is scary to many" (p. 7), because "novelty is always uncomfortable" (Jones, 2006, p. 12). With the acknowledgement that aesthetic expression conveys meaning, ABR represents a "willingness to return to the 'original difficulty of things' by peering beneath the surface of the familiar, the obvious, the orthodox, in a rescrutinizing (researching) of the world" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 16). This aesthetic, non-traditional representation of research tends to make academics uncomfortable. Applying an "interrogative disposition [ABR…] promotes a level of dislocation, disturbance, disruptiveness, disequilibrium that renders it […] useful, and therefore, in this unusual sense of the word, truthful" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 16). Despite traditions and opposition, in recent years more

and more "graduate students are looking for arts-based expertise, and departments are grappling with how to support and evaluate the work" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1225). A vast coalition of ABR researchers are bringing to light the complexity of the human experience that cannot be captured in graphs and data tables. We are allowed to recognize that "staying close to artistic ways of knowing, then and now, goes against the grain of the prevailing institutional mind sets and values" (McNiff, 2018, p. 22), while also making room for artistic expression as valid research.

ABR Distinction Among Traditional Methodologies

Representationally, the arts accomplish two important things formerly absent from doctoral research. First, artistic appeal "extends beyond academia" because it brings social research to a broader audience base, "mitigating some of the educational and social class biases that have traditionally dictated beneficiaries of academic scholarship" (Leavy, 2020, p. 304). Second, artistic expression has the "capability to evoke emotions, promote reflection, and transform the way that people think" (Leavy, 2020, p. 304). To reach a broader audience and have more utility to benefit the participants and their communities, the "goal is to speak to diverse audiences both within and outside the academy. The use of accessible, vernacular, and aesthetic language and image, helps to explicitly reach out to larger, more diverse audiences and to engage in what Barone [(2012)…] calls 'truly dialogical conversation[s] about educational possibilities' (p. 44)" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 9).

In ABR the researcher plays an alternative, immersive role in the process that ultimately leads to deeply meaningful and aesthetic expression of the findings and analysis. In this collision of researcher-participants-findings-analysis-art/aesthetic expression, "explicit recognition of the self-other continuum [abides], where the researcher is explicitly recognized as the primary

instrument for documenting and interpreting knowledge from participants or from a specific context which ultimately informs the researcher about him or herself" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 9). There is no separation between the researcher, the generated data, and the analysis because all data in question is generated and analyzed through the subjectivities of the researcher and their ability to convey meaning through their chosen medium. ABR tends to be transformative for researchers and participants alike (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1251).

Given the alternative nature of ABR, it is "inherently complex and requires different forms of assessment than traditional research" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1252), and ABR dissertations in particular represent "an array of new forms" of "process, searching for meaning, and interpreting for understanding," unique in communicating research (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1234). Doctoral researchers are expected to be in conversation with scholars and established theory but their findings and analysis are often woven together into the artistic representations for enhanced meanings (Sinner, et al., 2006). ABR dissertations are a "process of constructing alternative forms of (re)presentation [as] an ongoing palimpsestic process […] of (re)imagining, (re)presentations and critical reflections" (Sanders, 1999, pp. 555-559), and therefore do not follow prescribed templates traditionally expected within doctoral scholarship (Leavy, 2020). The "growing body [of ABR] presents possibilities, challenges, and interpretations that trouble the understood framework of qualitative research. [ABR] inquiry requires a certain state of mind, an artful 'dwelling,' an ever-present meditative, imaginative, creative process of meaning making and interpretive activities rooted in perception and language" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1255). ABR represents a type of evolution in qualitative research. While it is sometimes in conversation with traditional methods, it encapsulates a sphere of inquiry all its own that unsettles "ossified thinking and provoke[s] imagination; a conscientious consideration of the

resonances that sing out to the world from word, image, sound, and performance" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1252).

Nonfiction Creative Writing as the Chosen Medium

Nonfiction creative writing, pertaining to personal narrative writing, involves sharing pieces of one's life in a deeply aesthetic fashion, with integrated creative writing skills in the literary experience. To put it artistically, creative nonfiction writing speaks the "heart's discourse because the heart is never far from what matters. Without the heart pumping its words, we are nothing but an outdated dictionary, untouched" (Pelias, 2004, p. 7). Clifford Geertz (1973) coined the phrase "thick descriptions" in ABR and Bauer (2018) explains that creative nonfiction "life stories are like any other story in that the narrator uses particular elements or tools of narration to convey particular elements of personal meaning" (p. 89). Creative nonfiction personal narrative writing, versus reflective types of writing, conveys meaning from personal lived experiences with particular attention to audience and aesthetic writing skill, moving from a writer-centered to a reader-centered writing style.

Telling our stories gives meaning to our lived experiences, so much so that our stories "are almost as necessary as the air we breathe, and become our equipment for living" (Bochner, 2014, p. 196). The creator of *Creative Nonfiction* magazine, Lee Gutkind (2012), explains that creative nonfiction narratives are "true stories well told" (p. 6). He further explains that the "goal is to make nonfiction stories feel like fiction so that your readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy. But the stories are true" (p. 6). In creative nonfiction ABR we seek to connect with one another's humanity. "When we represent and share our research, our goal is not simply to expose others to it, but to affect those who read our work. […] We aim to affect our readers. […] We hope our research is written well enough to make a lasting impact. Well-written stories

are memorable" (Leavy, 2020, p. 49). As Maya Angelou (1990) beautifully puts it, "the idea is to write it so that people hear it and it slides through the brain and goes straight to the heart."

Reader Response Analysis Lens

Reader response analysis engages affectively with text, focusing on the personal connection one makes with the ideas expressed in the literature (Momeni, 2026, pp. 2-3). Reader response analysis pays attention to the transactions between reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1994), dependent upon a reader's subjectivities, preferences, and personal aesthetic. Readers construct meaning of text in a "situational frame" that fuses together reader with text (VaeBen & Strasen, 2021, p. 137). From a reader response perspective in this study I, the reader of the data generated (e.g. student writing, interviews, etc.), am subject to my own lived experiences; I interpret and understand the data based from a deeply personal perspective dependent upon my social conditioning, ideology, and personal reason. Combining arts-based research and a reader response analytical lens, there is discovery of "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality […] is not discovered but constructed [… because] actual meaning emerges only when consciousness engages with" overt and potential experiences (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42-43). Regardless of other meanings one might make of the data generated in this study, I as the researcher am *constructing* meaning out of the texts (the data generated) in this experience and therefore frame those connections as my reader response data analysis.

Chapter 3 - Introduction to Arts-Based Research Practice and Study Parameters

Intro to ABR and Justification for Alternative Scholarly Representation

Arts-based research (ABR), in general, attempts to make meaning out of artistic expression in a subjectively analytical way to inform research and heighten understanding. Inherently, arts-based researchers are social science researcher artists (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 46). Within ABR, *art* is not limited to the scope of arts and letters. Rather, ABR rests within daily life, signified interrogations of meaning captured aesthetically. ABR is "seeking to spell out in theory and practice how poetry, drama, [creative prose], visual art, and performance all contribute to ways of knowing and becoming, to conceptions of epistemology and ontology" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1237). ABR uses the words "*practice* over *method*" and "*data generation*, not *data collection*" because the "former implies that we are active in creating data via inquiry and not merely 'finding' it" (Leavy, 2020, p. 307). Each practitioner of ABR will introduce a different perspective, and mode of illuminating that perspective. While possibly in conversation with established methodologies and theories, ABR is its own way of knowing and creating knowledge. In ABR personal and social meanings are explored and expressed through art.

To attempt to align ABR findings and analysis within prescribed representation templates would be to undermine the very foundation and purpose of practicing arts-based research. Given the alternative nature of ABR practice in terms of emergence, placement, purpose, and form "arts-based inquiry cannot be governed by pre-established rules and cannot be judged according to predetermined [outlines. ABR research criteria] occupies a liminal space between long traditions of research scientific approaches and artful practices that are explored, composed, and

inspired by artists (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1229). The research findings are foundationally expressed artistically and the analysis is interwoven into the findings for aesthetic affect (Sinner, 2006). Since "arts-based research methodologies are still in conflict with conservative scholarly and political climates that emphasize traditional, scientific definitions of research" (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 7), "knowledge constructed with arts-based practices must be assessed on its own terms […] so that the research community is not forced to compare apples and oranges" (Leavy, 2020, p. 306). Through the pursuit of creative knowing and expression within ABR, we step outside of the confines of traditional research representation and prescribed templates.

This dissertation attempts to align with ABR expectations, needfully deviating from typical dissertation templates, as will be specifically explained at the end of this chapter. Though I am in conversation with scholars, literature, and theory that have greatly informed this study, the findings and analysis are uniquely presented. ABR "dissertations do not look like traditional dissertations. Faculty members unfamiliar with [ABR often] fail to see that they include […] more than the content of the [expected] five chapters, though the standard content may not be immediately observable" (Atkins, 2012, p. 63). More traditional methods in educational research are typically "defined within a limited space and time with an emphasis on an interpretation of data" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1228). However, with ABR, artist researchers are instead focusing practices to "create, interpret, and portray understandings" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1228). Thus, while we approach the ideas that inform art-based research, the actual findings and analysis pivot away from traditional research procedures because they are too confining for discovery within aesthetic spheres. There are inherent "limitations of numbers, graphs and check marks in boxes to give voice to the complexity of the human story" (Atkins, 2012, p. 61). At its core, ABR is "about tentative artistic and aesthetic explorations of problems that may not [otherwise] see the

light of day in traditional forms of research" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 61), or be otherwise disseminated to a broader audience due to the highly restrictive language and accessibility of more traditionally presented research findings and analysis.

ABR is very socially transactional, merging the researcher with the research and participants in very philosophically personal ways. The purpose of ABR "inquiry most frequently center[s] around general themes of self identity […], socio-cultural landscapes […], or embodied experience" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1238), involving philosophical and aesthetic inquiries into the human condition, memories, life and death, power dynamics, fear, hope, loss, and so on (Dissanayake, 2003, p. 15). In ABR the researcher draws on the "lived experiences of self and participants" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1242). The practice of ABR involves people being open to express themselves and learn about themselves, and their fellow humans, in the process of the introspective collaboration ABR seeks to facilitate. Practicing ABR often "means that researchers are immersed in a journey of discovery, of learning about themselves as well as learning about themselves in relationship to others; […] there is no simple distinguishing between the researcher and the research, […] an organic and lively relationship [between research and researcher that makes] an intricate dance" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1242). In this way, regardless of the artistic medium utilized in the study, with ABR we tell our stories to one another and honor each other's contributions to the conversation.

Reasoning for Creative Writing in ABR

In an academic environment when STEM fields dominate on an invisible Importance-Meter in the consciousness of school administrators and curriculum designers, humanities are too often being quantified. What cannot be easily, objectively scored is often either an afterthought or disregarded completely. I believe writing instruction is seen as more of a means to an end –

the end being able to intelligently express/explore/relay ideas in *other* fields such as physics, biology, and microcomputer applications. Ash et al. (2021) conveys the problem beautifully, using an architect metaphor, in *Imaginative Teaching Through Creative Writing: A Guide for Secondary Classrooms*:

> Some might argue that the study of literature in English Language Arts classrooms adequately addresses […] personal, interpersonal, and cultural concerns and that many students aren't and shouldn't have to be creative writers. However merely appreciating the works of others isn't enough. Students must create their own poems and stories to better understand and appreciate the ones they read, in the same way an architect can't only and forever pore over others' blueprints to fully master that discipline. If students aren't given license and space to explore their own creativity in the one required subject of their secondary education that should allow such work, where will they gain this necessary training in the variety and possibility of the language they're learning? (p. 16).

A result of the gap "between the craft of writing and the true development of students' expressions and ideas" (Vinci, 2022, p. 38), creative writing is often neglected at secondary and post-secondary institutions (Ash et al., 2021), viewed as an elective if offered at all. However, as has been extensively explored in this dissertation, creative writing contributes to the well-being and overall development of the student, also contributing to higher scores in other fields (Graham, 2014). Therefore, this ABR project focuses on the experience of teaching creative writing with aesthetic expressivism in mind, not easily quantifiable yet holistically appreciated.

While ABR is a growing field within research settings, an artistic branch that is commonly under-considered therein is creative nonfiction writing. Specifically, within creative nonfiction, I speak of personal narrative writing while learning and applying common tenets of

creative prose. “Narrative is not merely a research method but an integral part of life […] because stories have the potential to make us feel connected; open our eyes to new perspectives; stimulate the development of empathy, self-awareness or social reflection […and] enable us to imagine what is and what might be” (Leavy, 2020, p. 43). In so doing, this study is an arts-based project, utilizing creative nonfiction tenets with personal narrative writing as the chosen artistic medium. Within the creative writing art form, we move beyond reflective writing by applying immersible descriptive language in such a way that the audience can experience the story from their unique perspective, shifting the crafted story from writer-centered to reader-centered. Inside the scope of creative writing, as explained in chapters 1 and 2, creative nonfiction is the presentation of true events in creative prose and personal narrative writing is written from the perspective of the author, is one singular moment from the author’s life, and emphasizes aesthetic writing skill with attention to audience.

Within nonfiction creative writing, when one is writing about their lived experiences through personal narrative, participants and the researcher participants share pieces of their lives in a deeply aesthetic fashion, with integrated creative writing skills in the literary experience. Creative nonfiction writing as the art form is “uniquely able to tap into and describe human experience” (Leavy, 2020, p. 13). Keeping in mind the nature of ABR as a conductor between art and social science, and the distinctive possibilities for personal narrative writing to convey authentic meaning, this study investigated the impact on writing when secondary students were taught specific creative writing skills. To simplify, in this ABR study, I taught participants elements of creative writing and had them apply those skills to writing a personal narrative. I then holistically evaluated the experience and data generated through a readers response lens.

That analysis is woven into my presentation of the findings, i.e. my own creative nonfiction story of the experiences during this study.

Research Design

The study focused on expressive and aesthetic prose to convey the autonomous meanings the students made of the lived experiences they chose to share. The purpose of this arts-based research project was to explore how students represent their lived experiences through creative prose when given creative writing instruction as well as to engage in a conversation about the impact creative writing instruction has, or does not have, on students' perceived writing voices. The following research questions guided my effort and process during this study:

1. How do secondary students engage with and represent their lived experiences during creative nonfiction writing instruction in the classroom?
2. How do students describe the impact of creative nonfiction instruction on their sense of voice as writers?

In order to explore these questions during the study, I instructed a secondary junior-level cohort, divided between 2 classes, for two weeks in the craft of creative nonfiction writing.

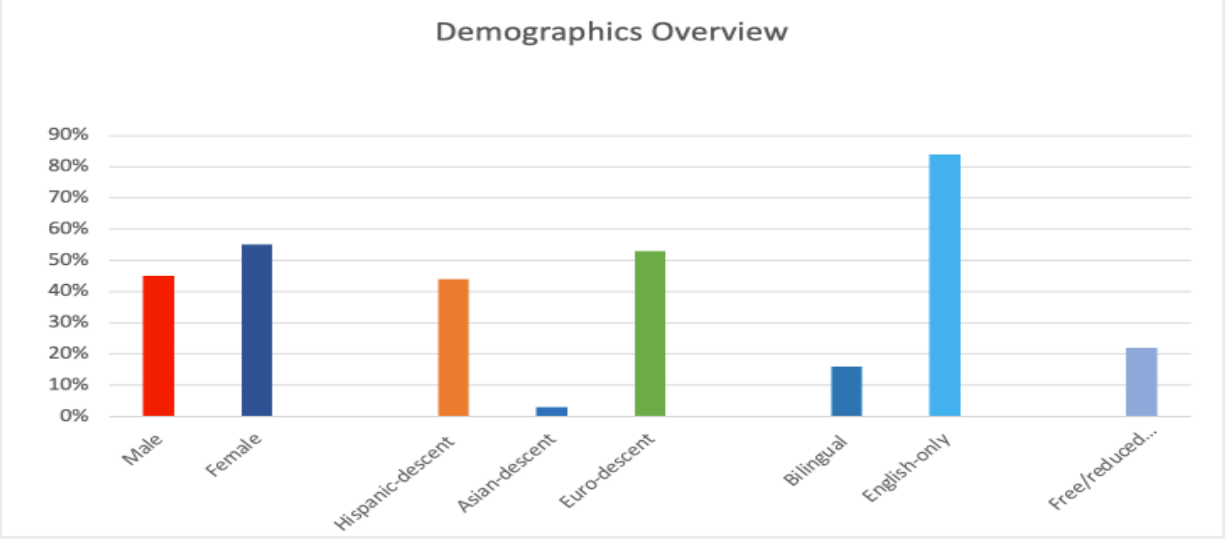
Study Context and Participants

The study took place at a private Catholic high school that we will call St. Mary's, during the spring semester of 2026. The setting for St. Mary's is micropolitan, a regional hub surrounded by rural Kansas. This site was chosen due to the researcher's professional connections with the school. The dates were chosen by the school's administration. Due to scheduling, we met 3 times the first week and 4 times the second week. Then, after a break for 5 days, met one last time. The class sessions alternated between 46 minutes long and 86 minutes long, depending on the day of the week. To simplify, I refer to the timeline as a 2-week study.

The names of the high school and participants are all changed to pseudonyms for privacy protection. The junior cohort was chosen by the school administration to participate in this study for logistical reasons.

There were 32 students in the cohort, divided by 2 classes that met in the afternoon (6th and 7th hour). 6th hour contained 9 students and the remaining 23 students comprised the 7th hour class. A broad view of the demographics of the cohort (Figure 3.1), include 15 male and 17 female. 44% of the participants are of Hispanic descent, 3% are of Asian descent, and 53% are of European descent. All 16% of the bilingual students speak Spanish and English. Most, 79%, live with both of their birth parents and none have IEPs.

Figure 3.1. *Overview of Participant Demographics*



Each student in the cohort was required to participate in the lessons and assignments, as prescribed by the school administration at St. Mary's. Being the visiting instructor for each class within the cohort, school administration wanted their work to count towards their GPAs and to have everyone given equal weight with the experience and assignments. However, I made it clear to each student on multiple occasions that whether or not they chose to consent and ascent to having their writing included in the study, or to be interviewed, was completely voluntary and

would have no bearing on their grade. No work was included in the study that did not have both consent and ascent secured. Approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained and all designated procedures followed. I created a Google classroom to contain a digital copy of the lesson readings and to help facilitate the submission and feedback process for the typed first drafts and revised final drafts. Otherwise, all other collected data was handwritten, from myself and from the students.

Variables that impacted the study include scheduling and school activities, i.e. students needing to miss classes. I created a work around by posting summaries of the lessons for students who needed to miss on our Google classroom page.

There were also possible economic disparities, as 22% of the junior cohort receive free or reduced lunch, and possible language disparities with 16% of the cohort bilingual.

Research Participant's Professional Role at Research Site

I, the researcher participant, teach dual-enrolled high school students college English courses at St. Mary's for a local community college. I am a full-time college English instructor but maintain a secondary ELA teaching license for the state of Kansas.

Research Instruments and Data Collection

The research design involved lessons demonstrating various pedagogical strategies (see Figure 3.2 and Appendices A-I).

Figure 3.2. *Lesson Overview Graphic*

Day 1

Lesson Overview: Intro/Verbal Story Sharing, Choose Focus Story for Study

Day 2

Lesson Overview: Read Ella Enchanted Excerpt by Gail Levine, Analysis of Writing - Class Discussion, Learn Concepts of Characterization through Dialogue, Learndialogue formatting, Small Group Activity/Game Practicing Writing Diallogue, Practice with Drafting Conversation from Chosen Story, Small Group Collaboration/Feedback

Note: Handwritten feedback was provided on the handwritten exercises completed in class.

Day 3

Lesson Overview: Learn Concepts of "Show Don't Tell," read "Two Ways of Seeing a River" by Mark Twain, Analyze Essay - Class Discussion, Discuss Active Verbs & To Be Verbs, Practice Show Don't Tell a Moment from Chosen Story, Small Group Collaborative Activity

Note: Handwritten feedback was provided on the handwritten exercises completed in class.

Day 4

Lesson Overview: Read Excerpt from A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle, Analyze Story for Incorporation of Show Don't Tell With Dialogue - Class Discussion, Practice Show Don't Tell with Dialogue, Small Group collaboration/Feedback

Note: Handwritten feedback was provided on the handwritten exercises completed in class.

Day 5

Lesson Overview: Learn POV/Close POV, Read Excerpts from JRR Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *Edgar Allan Poe's* "The Pit and the Pendulum, Analyze Excerpts for Tone - Class Discussion, Make Tone Words/Phrases List for Chosen Stories, Read Cecelia Ahern's The Time of Our Lives Excerpt, Class Discussion on Pacing, Practice Writing Excerpt Incorporating Close POV, Tone, & Pacing

Note: Handwritten feedback was provided on the handwritten exercises completed in class.

Day 6

Lesson Overview: Discuss Shaping Stories, Verbally Share Stories - Small Group Activity, Begin Typing Stories in Collaborative Pods with Access: Teacher, Handwritten Exercises, Teacher Feedback on Handwritten Exercises.

Day 7

Lesson Overview: Time to Type Stories with Access to Teacher, Handwritten Exercises, Teacher Feedback on Handwritten Exercises.

Note: Students submitted first typed drafts after this lesson. Then, extensive typed feedback was given afterwhich students were given five days on their own to apply feedback and revise before the next lesson.

Day 8

Lesson Overview: Final Verbal Sharing of Stories, Questionnaire.

Note: Students were given the opportunity during this lesson to ask one-on-one questions about their feedbackfrom instructor (clarification and/or elaboration), if needed. Then, they were also given an additional 3 days to continue working on thier stories before the final revised drafts were due.

8 Class Sessions

Our lessons were comprised of basic creative writing tenets, namely: characterization through dialogue, show don't tell, close point of view (POV), tone, pacing, feedback, and revision. During each lesson the students handwrote a piece of their chosen stories. Each lesson began with activities to foster a positive writing community, targeted readings that demonstrated the specific creative writing tenets introduced (Sloan, 1991), and demonstrations of various creative writing skills followed by writing exercises in which the students practiced, shared, and collaborated with their classmates (Kaya, 2016).

Handwritten Exercises

Learning to write effectively is a process and it begins by learning the various components one at a time, then gradually combining concepts (Walker, 2018; Baxa, 2015; Burnam, 2001). Each lesson covered a chosen aspect of creative writing that incorporated practice writing sessions in which students were asked to apply the concepts discussed, each respective day of the study. The exercises were handwritten in a blue book that I provided. The handwritten exercises included practice sessions on: characterization through dialogue, show don't tell, combining show don't tell with dialogue, consistent close POV, tone, and pacing. Students were asked to focus each exercise on a part of their chosen story to help develop what eventually became their final drafts. When I examined these, I provided handwritten feedback in the margins of their writing.

Typed First Drafts

After collecting developmental, preparatory work, the next step in the writing process is to get the words on the page in the form of a typed draft (Boardman, 2020; Bomer; 2021; Carless, 2006; Guggenheim, 2021). Typed first drafts are more formal in the sense that it starts to

look like a real story, and yet they remain low stakes since there is a built-in expectation that they will receive improvement guidance and the opportunity to revise and craft a final draft. After talking with students about shaping a story, and providing handwritten feedback on their practice writing exercises, I asked them to type out their story based off of the material they had accumulated in their blue books. The expectation was to turn in at least 3 full pages of a story, with notes to me about sections that they had not completed but that they wanted to include in the final draft. Drafts were submitted into Google classroom. Upon the submission of their first drafts, I spent the next few days typing feedback in Google classroom. The feedback I left for each individual student was extensive. After which they were expected to revise and complete their stories.

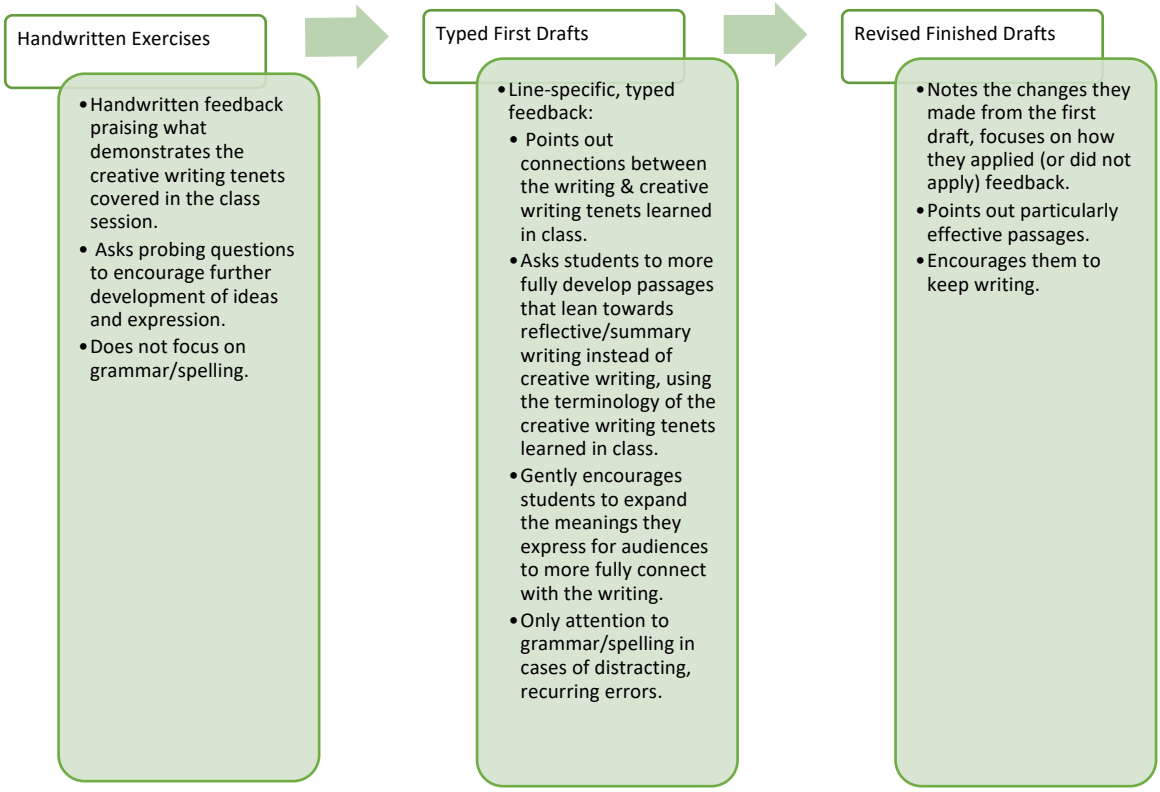
Revised Final Drafts

The crescendo of our interactions and writing/feedback sessions culminated into the revision and completion of their final drafts (Dieckman, 2020; Goffman, 1959; Gutkind, 2012; Newkirk, 2015), the ripened fruit from this entire endeavor. The final drafts needed to be at least 5 full pages in length. They were asked to reference the handwritten exercises and feedback as well as the feedback provided on the typed first drafts. After receiving typed feedback, the students were given 5 days to work on revisions before we met again wherein, they had the opportunity to ask follow-up questions about the feedback I provided. After that final lesson, they were given another 3 days to complete and submit their final drafts. I holistically analyzed these writing samples, in conjunction with their previous writing, focusing on voice and meaning development from a reader response analytical perspective.

Feedback & Writing Stages in the Study

Given the strong collaborative nature of the study, feedback played an integral role in building a reader-centered writing voice in order to pivot from reflective writing to creative writing. This study employed 3 distinct writing stages, all of which contained an element of feedback (see Figure 3.3) and all of which were collected as data types. Meaningful feedback

Figure 3.3. *Draft Stages and Feedback Types*



Note. Verbal, in-the-moment collaborative feedback was also employed in this study in which students, as well as the researcher participant, gave and received verbal guidance and encouragement in their small group activities during the lessons.

is otherwise known as "wise feedback" or guiding feedback and should be present at each stage of writing projects (Polman et al., 2021) with particular attention given to the writer's accomplishments (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994). The feedback should also shepherd students into improving their work while supporting the meanings they wish to convey (Newton, 2022). An

example of this type of "guiding feedback," on a line such as *it was the happiest day of my life* might look something like the following: *What would that look like to an outsider? Try to describe what your happiness that day felt like to someone who wasn't there with you, in a way they could understand. Slow down and dig a little deeper. Remember to apply what we learned in class: tone, pacing, and show don't tell*.

Interviews

Though this research is not a case study, I employed a case study interview strategy; the questions were more fluid than rigid to allow for flexibility, follow-up, and a deeper understanding of the thoughts and emotions the interviewees wished to express (Yin, 2018). Though the specific anchor questions can be found in the appendices, our interview conversations leaned towards the meaning each participant made of learning to write creatively vs. essay writing, what writing their respective stories meant to them personally, and what they were particularly proud of. There were also aspects in some conversations of how the study could be improved upon, advice for future ELA teachers, and what was difficult about the study.

Questionnaire

Questionnaires were handed out on the last day of our class sessions together to allow those not being interviewed an opportunity to share their perspective of the experience (see Appendix I). The form included a variety of lines of inquiry including:

- Rating the likelihood of continuing to write creatively on their own, outside of school.
- Which creative writing lesson made the most impact, if any, and how?
- If they improved and/or revised their story based on feedback.

- Circle all statements that applied to their experience of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with learning creative writing in this study as opposed to typical essay writing. There were 8 phrases to choose from displaying a spectrum of sentiments from “creative writing is not my thing at all” to “learning creative writing skills increased my writing confidence overall.”
- Space for additional comments about what the experience meant or did not mean to the student.

Field Research Journal

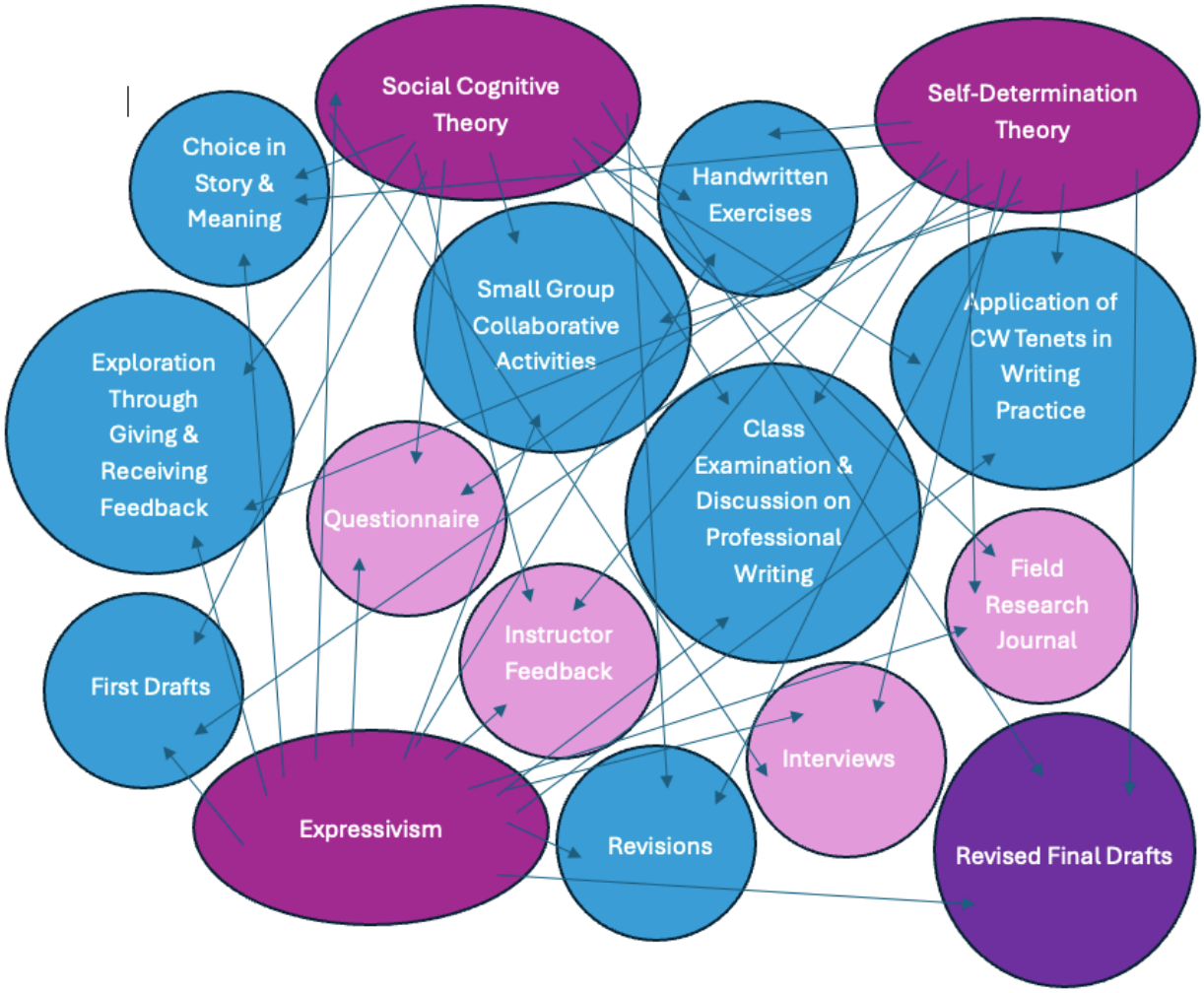
It was important for me to keep a detailed research journal during the experience, knowing that I would rely on that introspection during the crafting of my own creative nonfiction capturing of this experience. Writing down observations in the moment is vital to remembering and analyzing the critical components during research in order to “stay honest” about what happened and what impact was made (Yin, 2018). I kept a handwritten journal, often carrying it and a pen around the classroom with me taking notes as I went. I also stayed behind each day to get down all of my thoughts about the class sessions I was not able to capture exactly in-the-moment.

Data Elements Connection to Theoretical Framework

Each data component connects with the theoretical framework in place (see Figure 3.4), i.e. expressivism, self-determination theory, and social cognitive theory. For example, when students participated in the handwritten practice exercises, they applied expressivism with the language they choose to represent their thoughts; they applied self-determination theory in how they decided what to write about and what it means – how that meaning is expressed; they applied social cognitive theory by examining how they interacted with the people in their story

and in the collaborative work during these exercises. To give another example, when I gave students typed feedback on the first drafts, the opportunity to talk to me about feedback, and time to revise their drafts students participated in all three designated theories. Self-determination theory resides in how the students choose to understand, frame, and revise (or not) the language

Figure 3.4. *Research Instruments and Data Types within Theoretical Framework Map*



in their stories. Social cognitive theory is present two ways: in the act of giving and receiving feedback from another and by examining the interactions with others within the stories and what those interactions mean. Expressivism is displayed in the language students choose to convey the

experience being written about. Applicable throughout every piece of data connects with every theory outlined.

Sampling

The writing samples, interviewees, and excerpts from questionnaires were chosen to include in chapters 4 and/or 5 through purposive selection. Every member of the cohort, 32 students, participated in the classroom instruction and assignments. Within the group, both consent and ascent were obtained for 28 students. Among these 24 students, I chose the writing samples to include in the findings chapter based off of three considerations: 1.) the writing samples that I felt authentically represented a particular tenet of creative writing that was explored in the study, 2.) the writing samples that placed well within the aesthetic of my own writing and 3.) the writing samples that I connected with personally. The inclusion and exclusion of writing and interview samples were chosen based on these considerations during my creative process. 6 student writing samples were included in the findings; 4 of these students were also interviewed. Though not all students' work who had consented and assented could be explicitly incorporated, they each informed the study to some degree.

Within those students for whom consent and ascent was granted, students who wanted to be interviewed signed up for the opportunity. Of those who signed up, I chose to interview 6 students, 4 of whom are quoted directly in the findings. The two remaining interviewed aesthetically informed the findings but are not directly quoted. The six interviewed were chosen based off of various types of classroom interactions; they communicated either directly or subtly that they might have had something to say about their experiences in the study and I wanted to give them that opportunity.

Data Analysis

The data was subjectively evaluated and synthesized in my findings from a reader response analytical perspective. Reader response prioritizes "engaging with the text affectively, focusing on the pleasure and satisfaction of reading" (Momeni, 2026, pp. 2-3). Reader response examines the transactional nature between reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1994), dependent upon a reader's subjectivities, preferences, and personal aesthetic. As the reader, it is natural to feel compelled to construct my understanding of a text within a "situational frame" that encompasses myself with the text (VaeBen & Strasen, 2021, p. 137). I, the reader subject to my own lived experiences, interpret and understand texts based from a deeply personal perspective dependent upon my social conditioning, ideology, and personal reason. In conjunction with ABR and a reader response analytical lens, there is discovery of "all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality […] contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world [… and therefore] meaning is not discovered but constructed [… because] actual meaning emerges only when consciousness engages with" more obvious and potential experiences (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42-43). Regardless of other meanings one might make, I as the researcher constructed meaning out of this experience and therefore leaned into that in my data analysis.

In my field research journal, I included notations on the meanings I was making of the student writing samples throughout the process along with the personal connections I made through my reader response lens. I took particular note of voice development in comparing the handwritten exercises with the typed drafts as well as the meanings each student expressed in their respective stories. An amalgamation of their texts, and my reader response understanding of the texts, enabled the creation of findings in chapter 4. Due to the highly subjective and aesthetic nature of ABR, no coding took place. Instead, the reader response interpretive approach allowed

me to examine each point of data individually for the personal connection that I could make with it and/or how it aligned (or not), with the theoretical framework and respective creative writing lessons presented.

A reader response analysis approach is highly appropriate for this particular study, given the heavy import put on expressivism for the students and for myself. This is a "socially situated meaning and perspective" aligned with "cognitive perception" and personal response (Stockwell, 2021, p. 7369). Simply put, the students made meanings of their stories and expressed that through aesthetic language, in the interviews, and in the questionnaires. I made personal connections and meanings out of my understanding of the meanings they expressed and wove them all together based off of my own reader response of their writing. Therefore, using a reader response lens to analyze the student writing in this study allowed me to immerse myself in the texts my students produced in order to make abiding connections between their humanity and my own. Inquiries through artistic means in ABR between researcher and participants are "not separate or illustrative of each other but interconnected and woven through each other to create additional and/or enhanced meanings. [… enabling] more broadly conceived identities of artist/researcher/teacher" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1224). Herein the analysis finds purchase, between the thoughts and words and interactions expressed in my creative nonfiction account of the study, found in chapter 4.

The passages of student writing specifically examined in chapter 4 and 5 were chosen based off of my subjective aesthetic. The data analysis was created and presented in an art-based creative nonfiction synthesis, also subjectively based on my personal aesthetic (see Chapter 4). Although the bulk of the data is presented in chapter 4, some data generated did not place within my writing aesthetic and is therefore presented in chapter 5 (from the questionnaires). As

detailed in chapters 1-3, in ABR the artistic product at the end *is* the representation of the findings and analysis of a study. So, while the data from the questionnaires has certainly informed this study and future research to an extent, it does not play a significant role in my representation of the findings within my own creative nonfiction writing and therefore is minimally analyzed through a reader response lens when presented in chapter 5.

Reliability/Trustworthiness

While subjectivity is involved in Arts-based Research as a methodology, or practice, there is also "an 'exactness' involved, for we are talking about imagination being exercised and creativity invoked in a precise interplay with *something"* (Crotty, 1998, p. 48). Though some ABR dissertations involve triangulation (Stahl & King, 2020), interviews, member checks, and field observations, "these strategies are separate from the process of making art but may provide the impetus to make art" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1246). In fact, when practicing in ABR "reliance on the concepts of reliability and validity does not ensure that work will have any significance for the research community or the public" (Leavy, 220, p. 306). Therefore, for ABR dissertations it is '"unusual' to find participants as the only source of experiential information. In fact, the most common source is the researcher. […] The presence and significance of the researcher must be 'felt' in research involving the arts" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1249), acutely illuminating "the intersection of the researcher's life with that of the researched" (Cole & Knowles in Neilson , Cole, & Knowles, 2001, p. 215). Each ABR study will yield different data and analysis due to the beautiful uniqueness present in our individuality. That said, attempts were made to claim as much trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as possible in the form of questionnaires, research journal, interviews, and rich descriptions of each interaction (see Appendices J-L). Member checks were also conducted to maintain integrity of subject representation. Periodic auditing of

field notes in conjunction with lesson plans and student writing occurred during the analysis process to maintain study integrity before drafting the findings and analysis in chapters 4 and 5.

The presentation of findings (see chapter 4), is based off of my own personal aesthetic, subjectivity, and experiences executing the study, influenced by my own life experiences. The transferability and generalizability of the experiences in the study can be achieved by following similar lesson plans (see Appendices A-I). Though, as explained, each individual researcher and class will be influenced by their own subjectivities and therefore the findings will uniquely align accordingly.

Positionality Statement

I have been teaching college-level English courses for the past nine years. During that time, I also spent three years as a full-time high school English teacher. While teaching at the secondary level I integrated creative writing whenever possible (nonfiction, fiction, poetry, graphic novel/comics, and even playwriting). As I created and taught these units, I couldn't help but notice the engagement from the students being noticeably more lively, sincere, and deep compared to when elements of creative writing were not incorporated in the unit assessments. Indeed, even as a college English composition instructor I make a point to instruct at least one personal narrative essay each semester which includes creative writing instruction. During the creative unit, even my college students are intrinsically captivated at the opportunity to learn effective ways of telling their personal stories. I often hear that it is their favorite out of all of the other types of writing we cover. I suspect, based on my research and experiences so far, that my secondary and post-secondary students prefer the creative writing units because it asks them to explore and make meaning out of their own lived experiences, knowing that they will be honored by me as their encouraging instructor. I learned the tenets of creative writing by completing 15

credits of creative writing courses, 9 of which are graduate-level and focus on creative prose, specifically including creative nonfiction. I also teach college-level creative writing courses.

I explain my history of teaching and learning creative writing for two reasons: because I have a wealth of experience with it and because, while this type of pedagogy is not exactly unique, it is rare in secondary settings. In both secondary and post-secondary ELA coursework, the curriculum is often laden with the typical research essays, compare/contrast essays, response essays, and so on. Rightfully so. However, as has been discussed at length here, when we allow students to write creatively about their lives, we honor something of value while letting them do the same at a very personal level. I am well acquainted with the process of teaching basic tenets of creative writing to composition students as well as creative writing students, of allowing them free reign over the content they interrogate in their writing, and in the process of evaluating their writing on an aesthetic level instead of a quantitative level. I am familiar with (even excited about), building a positive classroom writing community to lead up to the moments of sharing and collaboration that are needed to foster creative writing growth. I have a lot of experience providing guiding feedback to enrich writing while also being very kind and encouraging. Hopefully, with my background explained, my subjectivity, planning, efforts, and analysis can be trusted.

Creative Process

In my creative representation of the data/analysis of chapter 4, I felt a heavy mandate to capture the study as accurately as I possibly could, acknowledging my subjectivities. So, after the study concluded, I began by reviewing my field research journal and reading back through all of the student writing and interview transcripts. I divided up the data based on the different phases of the study, making sure that each lesson and tenet of creative writing was present in the

groupings. Then, within those groupings, I focused on passages that I personally connected with as well as felt best represented each of the respective phases in a way that I could aesthetically integrate into my own writing. There were certain moments and excerpts from students that I would have loved to include, but were left out simply because I had to make choices in order to keep my own creative writing within a reasonable and focused scope.

Having made all of the hard choices, I then began to do what I tell my students to do: to *show* what happened in the story. I represented each day of the study, writing creative prose and incorporating the exchanges and excerpts with/from the students. I sincerely tried to honor the meanings they were making in my own capturing of events, relying heavily on their exact wording and the notes from my field research journal to remind me of the various moments in the study. After I had a completed finished draft, I spent the next few months on several rounds of edits until I felt that the story I wrote aptly represented the data, analysis, and the meaning I made from the experience, aesthetically manifested.

What to expect in Chapters 4 & 5

Chapters 4 and 5 are typically the findings and analysis of a dissertation. However, "when doing ABR, there are no templates […] ABR demands we do away with typologies and standardized approaches that go against the nature of itself" (Leavy, 2020, p. 307). Therefore, here is what to expect from the remaining chapters of this dissertation:

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 is a creative nonfiction account of my experience executing this two-week study at St. Mary's, teaching creative writing tenets to the junior cohort and having them apply that instruction to personal narrative stories of their choosing. This nonfiction story represents the overwhelming majority of the findings as well as the analysis, interwoven. Periodically, there

are small leaf icons placed in the story to signify section breaks, i.e. different days and/or points in the study. Student writing samples are made obvious in the writing but is also signified with larger margins and italic font. The excerpts from interviews directly quote the interviewees and are written into the story as organic conversations. My story is intentionally written in a first-person present tense POV for easier comprehension when past-tense writing samples are integrated. Though I taught 2 different classes in the cohort, the story is written as if they were all a part of the same class for better flow of the narrative. My reader response analysis is present throughout, especially when specifically discussing my consumption of student writing and interactions.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 includes remaining data that did not place within my writing aesthetic along with minimal further analysis of that data, as well as a review of the study rationale, theoretical framework, study parameters, and an overview/review of the data integrated into chapter 4. There is a section synthesizing the data findings and analysis explored in chapter 4 and a discussion responding to my research questions guiding the study. Lastly, there are sections discussing the limitations of the study, the implications, and a conclusion discussing the future of student voice development.

Chapter 4 - Blood, Sharks, and Theatre: The Stories We Carry

"I grew up in the 80's with 5 older siblings, and they thought it would be hilarious to show their four-year-old baby sister the movie *Jaws*," I begin to the room full of high school juniors. "It absolutely terrified me. I was raised on the Gulf Coast of Texas and going to the beach was a beautiful part of my childhood, if not for my irrational fear of sharks - all because of *that movie*."

I note some smiles in the classroom; some looks of commiseration (they get it). I know that if I want my students to feel comfortable sharing their stories, I need to show them what it means to be vulnerable and share my own story.

"I became afraid of pipes, thinking a shark would jump out of them. At a certain point I was even afraid in man-made lakes, thinking a shark might burrow up through the mud."

The class chuckles mixed with scoffing sounds. There are some smirks, as if to say *but that's stupid.*

"I know it didn't make any sense! But I couldn't help it," I explain. "It had become my *phobia*."

At this, I see some head nods and some looks of sympathy. Perhaps some of them suffer from some kind of phobia, too.

I go on to tell them about all of the strange strategies I employed to try to overcome my fear of sharks, out of love for the ocean and spending time at the beach.

"One way I coped, while in the water, was to make sure someone else was always out further than me." I continue, over the amused tittering sounds, "Now, I know that doesn't make any sense, and it reveals a mercenary tendency on my part, but that somehow helped me, for a time, be in the water like I wanted to be."

I expand by explaining the different moments that stood out to me in my journey to overcome my fear of sharks, including swimming out past the jetties one time on a day when the water was particularly clear so I could see down deep. Jetties, of course, are long pier-like structures made of granite boulders that spike out along the beach every quarter-mile or so, put there to break the monster waves when the hurricanes come in.

Swimming out past the jetties meant being in deep water indeed.

I remember the rocking of the ocean as I tread water; it felt like I was *out to sea*. My body lifted and lowered with each rolling wave, no purchase for my feet in the sand. As I speak to the class, I remember the basso of my heartbeat in my ears as I forced steady breathing while frantically kicking my arms and legs to keep my head above water, determined to beat this fear. I felt a small jolt of power with each expansion of my lungs. As if bathing lungs in salty air could cleans the chaotic fear.

"I swam back to shore that day proud of myself," I say "but knowing it hadn't worked."

I will always remember the uncontrollable tremor in my hands as I shook, after swimming back to shore. I sat on the sandy beach and watched the sun wind its way toward the indigo horizon on the water that evening while I waited for the seizures to calm down.

I continue telling my story to a refreshingly non-apathetic adolescent audience. They're all looking at me, some leaning closer – all waiting to hear the next part of my journey in beating my fear of sharks.

"So, I decided, that if I hadn't beat my fear of sharks by the time I was forty-five years old I would go somewhere and pay to swim with the sharks." At this there were gasps from a few students, and a few smirks.

"Like, in the cages?" someone asked.

"That's right. I was going to go out there on a boat and be lowered into a cage to swim with the sharks. I was *determined* that this fear would not keep me from doing things that I love."

After some eyebrows raise, I continue. "Several years later, I swam with my family off the coast of Florida on the Atlantic side. My children splashed in the shallow waves but I was almost chest deep in the water. Suddenly, I saw a dorsal fin slicing through the surface of the waves, heading in my direction. It wasn't cutting a straight line, more of a wiggly side-to-side. As it got closer, I realized it was a shark and *it was coming right towards me*." More gasps come from the students. "I was a good swimmer but *there is no outswimming a shark*. While I started backing towards the beach, I knew it was no use to turn away."

So, I faced it.

"As it got closer, I thought it was about four or five feet long, not huge but not tiny either. It came up to a few feet away from me…"

I paused for effect.

"Then it turned and swam away," I finished with relish.

"No!" someone breathed along with a smattering of surprised noises from my captivated students.

"Yes! It just swam away." I shrug, still not fully comprehending the rationality of wild creatures. "That is when I learned that not all sharks are man-eaters. It was a really beautiful moment in my life. I swam with a shark and I am no longer afraid of them."

I still remember the cleansing, liberating gratitude that I felt when I encountered a shark in the wild and communed with it. I fell in love with sharks a little that day. But I also healed, in that moment, from a plague on my psyche that had made me feel small. I can't help standing up a little taller as I describe beating my fear of sharks.

For sharing my experience, I am gifted with several smiles, a few applaud. They like my story, I think.

I tip my head in a slight bow.

I am a visiting teacher for these juniors and this is the start of my two-week study with them at St. Mary's High School. The objective is to teach them tenets of creative writing and to have them apply that instruction to their lived experiences through handwritten personal narrative writing exercises, which will lead them each to typing out first drafts and then a finished, revised version of the stories they want to tell. I want to see how they apply creative writing instruction to telling their lived experiences. Also, I am interested to know what they think of learning creative writing in relation to developing their sense of voice as writers. I know that not many high school students are given this opportunity to focus on creative prose, with the exception of larger schools that sometimes offer it as an elective. Two weeks isn't very long, but hopefully it will be an enriching enough experience for the students to do something meaningful with it.

After introducing myself, telling my story, and explaining the premise of our time together, I ask them to brainstorm story ideas. "Make a list," I instruct, pointing to the list of possible story categories I have projected on the board, "of moments from your life when you were particularly proud of yourself, learned an important lesson, felt that the moment was unique and unforgettable, felt strongly connected to your heritage or family, and moments when you *realized* something about yourself." I play Debussy's *Reverie* and let them mentally comb through the stories of their lives, writing ideas.

As they write, and I wander the room. I have doubts. What if no one cares and they just participate because I'm their teacher and I am asking them to do this during our time together? I

pace between the clusters of desks, taking note of the novels on the shelves along the walls: Pausch's *The Last Lecture*, Lewis' *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* among others. All authors with a dynamic narrative voice who, through instruction and practice, learned to tell stories that made a difference in literature, education, and the world. Whether the students care or not, I am at least giving them that chance to learn to tell their stories, I remind myself. It is up to *them* to do something meaningful with it.

"Now, in your groups," their desks are arranged in clumps of three and four; it comes in handy for the collaborative activities I have planned, "I want you to each practice verbally telling one of your stories and at least describing some of the others on your list. Then, I want you to give each other feedback on choosing which story to focus on during this 2-week creative writing experience." I look around the room and continue, "while you help your classmates choose which story, ask yourselves the following questions" I tick off the questions on my fingers and gesture to the projected slide. "Which story would I like to read the most? Which story might resonate the most with my own personal experiences? And which story do I believe my classmate would *enjoy* sharing the most?"

They proceed with their conversations. Some groups, I can already tell, are having a hard time caring as they immediately start talking about baseball practice. I resist rolling my eyes. Other groups, I am pleased to see, are having genuine conversations listening to their classmates and sharing stories. It is enough for me to call it an encouraging start.



"Today we're going to be learning about dialogue," I explain how characters speaking with one another enhances stories. "It illustrates the relationship dynamics between the

characters in the story, it displays personal character traits of the people speaking and listening, and other components like cultural inclinations and demographics."

On the board I show them the following two lines of dialogue as an example that I want us to pick apart:

"Excuse me, sir" Annette asked. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Half past time for lunch," he grumbled.

After reading the lines aloud, I point to the dialogue lines and ask "just from these two lines what do we know about Annette?"

"She doesn't know what time it is."

I expected this response. "Yes, that's right. She doesn't have a watch or phone. We can also assume that she is most likely outside, somewhere without clocks on the walls." There are some head nods. "What else can we gather about Annette?"

"She doesn't know that guy."

"You got it. What does that mean about *her*?" I try to get them to dig a little deeper but I get a lot of blank stares.

A brave soul hesitantly offers "She talks to people?"

"Yep. She isn't shy about talking to someone she doesn't know. She might be a bit of an extrovert. What else?"

"She is polite," they're getting braver in answering the question now.

"Why do you say that?"

"She said 'sir.'"

"That's right. She *is* polite. Now, what might her use of the word 'sir' mean about her, in addition to being polite?"

"She's from the South!"

"Yes! She certainly could be." We're all getting a little excited now, trying to figure out this mysterious Annette. "Any other ideas?"

Everyone quiets down, thinking. After a few beats I help them out. "Might she be in the military?"

Head nods all around and a few *ohhh* sounds.

"Right? It's possible. They sir and mam all over the place in the military. Okay, let's pivot to the person she is talking to. What can we surmise about him?"

"He's grumpy."

"And hungry!"

"That's right. Some might call hum *hangry*," I contribute in approval. "What else?"

After a few beats someone says "He's old." A few chuckles at this.

I grin. "Why do you say that?"

"Because younger people don't talk like that."

"Good point," I agree. "He is most likely from an older demographic, based off of his language, and he clearly has no compunction about speaking in a curt tone to a stranger." I try to wrap this up to get to the point. "Can you see all of the information we gleaned about these two characters all from these two simple lines of dialogue?" I am noticing some nods of understanding. "When you are writing your stories, you might not remember every word someone said," I tell them. "But you will remember how you felt in that moment and some of the character traits of the people you are including in your story, how you got along with them, and so on. This is *creative writing*; the words don't have to be exact. They do, though, need to

illustrate who the people *are* that are speaking, how they get along with each other, cultural or setting situations, etc."

We read the first two chapters of Gail Carson Levine's *Ella Enchanted*, then pick through the dialogue to decipher character and relationship traits that the dialogue reveals. After examining the professional writing, I have them get out their writing books to practice drafting a conversation that could illustrate a moment from the story they are going to tell. I turn on Tchaikovsky's *Seasons* in the background and let them write.

After a time, I have them swap their writing with groupmates and workshop the conversations. "When you're talking in your small groups, focus on the vibe and character traits expressed in your classmates' dialogue writing. Also, when you're examining any part of a classmates' story, remember to be encouraging and treat it with care. They are sharing pieces of themselves in these writings; show it the proper respect, please."

Some of the group conversations are much livelier than others, but I am pleased with their participation so far and I am happy to see them engaging with the material in a mostly joyful way.

That night, as I look at the first drafts of dialogue in their stories, I am delighted to read about a student hiking up a mountain for the first time, another trying out theatre for the first time, and another talking with her mom about dinner. Pleasant imagery, capturing the smaller moments that make us, like a meaningful conversation between a son and father about coaching the soccer team.

Then, I get chills and reach for a blanket when I read a student's first experience confronting death professionally. She, Liberty, is a CNA nurse in training working at an elderly care facility and she writes a conversation with a coworker:

Quietly, I walked over to my coworker and asked "Is he doing any better?"

She looked up with a worried face and said "No. He's just getting worse. I would say he approximately has less than 24 hours to live."

I looked up at her and made a sad face, with tears building up I said "Oh no, that makes me so sad. If he dies on my shift I'm going to cry and it will be my first time doing end-of-life care on a resident."

I pause my reading and wrap the blanket tighter around me. The poet Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote that "childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies." When children are confronted with death, it *grows them up*. In Liberty's words capturing of that moment at work, we see the convergence of childhood with adulthood. Caring for someone as they take their final breath is a very noble and compassionate thing, but it is also a very adult thing – a child no longer.

Sitting on my couch, reading this, I can't help but return to the inescapable pull of adulthood I experienced, too, at her exact age. I had experienced death before, friends and relatives – people that I love and miss very much. But it was a very different thing entirely to be sixteen years old and find my father dead on the cement outside of our home. Abrasively, the flashes of fear and grief and disbelief and anger strike my brain. Remembering how that one moment changed the entire trajectory of my life. Remembering his absence at the important moments of my life: my wedding, the birth of my children, graduating from college. Losing him at that age, in that particular circumstance, fundamentally changed me.

I return to looking at my student's writing. My situation was completely different than hers, of course. But I can't help but ask myself: which ways experiencing death in a professional

capacity is changing *her* as she embarks on her career caring for the sick and dying? Clearly this is a moment that carries significance for her. Perhaps it will for the rest of her life, in some way.



We discuss active verbs and descriptive language in a concept called "show; don't tell." To me, show don't tell is the difference between telling your friend you ate a yummy pizza and actually describing the pizza in a way that makes them want to eat pizza. Show don't tell is basically using words to artistically and aesthetically put readers right there, experiencing the thing being described. To demonstrate show don't tell with professional writing, we read Mark Twain's "Two Ways of Seeing a River":

> …A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold, through which a solitary log came floating, black and conspicuous; in one place a long, slanting mark lay sparkling upon the water; in another the surface was broken by boiling, tumbling rings, that were as many-tinted as opal. Where the ruddy flush was faintest, was a smooth spot that was covered with graceful circles and radiating lines, ever so delicately traced...

After we pick apart Twain, talk about using active verbs to minimize the use of *to be* verbs, and look over several additional examples of show don't tell, I ask the students to practice show don't tell for a moment from their stories. I play Lefèvre's *Consolation* and walk around the room as they write. I notice a student whispering to her neighbor and walk over to investigate.

"Can I help?" I ask.

Elsa looks up, a little nervous. "I don't have the words to write."

"What are you trying to say? Maybe you can describe it to me." I know it sometimes helps to say it out loud before writing it down. As people verbalize what they are trying to figure out, thoughts become less nebulous – making sense in a way they can more easily be put into written words.

But she reticently replies with "I don't' know how to say…"

"Are you bilingual?" I intuit.

"Yeah," she confirms.

"Spanish?"

She nods a yes.

"Excellent," I say. "I want you to think about how you would say this in Spanish. Write that down then work from there." Spanish is the language of her heart. Her English sounds great to me. But I am bilingual, too; I speak Italian. English is my first language but I acutely understand how everything important I want to articulate in Italian runs through my head in English first. I don't need to think about the quick, easy stuff in Italian – the *street talk*, as I like to call it. But trying to go deep descriptively or philosophically in Italian would take extra concentration (and most likely would be riddled with grammatical errors). So, I *get* her anxiety. Right now, I just want her to feel comfortable exploring self-expression so I add, "you might find, as you get into it, that some of the things you say need to *stay* in Spanish."

"Is that okay?" she asks with wide eyes.

"Absolutely. Especially if you include a conversation with someone that took place *in* Spanish. But if you're writing something that needs to be in English, run it past me, if you like, and we can try to figure out the right words together."

She beams and starts writing.

After their writing time, and their peer collaborative time, I ask for volunteers to share passages they are particularly proud of. I listen as students share, encouraged by their sincerity. Then, Melvin volunteers to read in his quiet baritone:

> *I lowered my line down into the teal fluorescent water that sparkled and teemed in the mid-day sun. I resisted with every ounce of strength as the water tried to pull me in, but I couldn't allow the teal, graceful ripples in the water to tempt me into the dark shadows circling and small tips of strong grey fins emerging from the outermost layer of the beautiful water*.

I stand there in stunned silence for a moment. I am there, looking at the gorgeous water watching these mysterious fish, possibly sharks, barely surface – teasing at the story to come. "Melvin, that was *really lovely*" I say with feeling. He looks down at his paper and smiles sheepishly, flashing a dimple. In this passage showing himself fishing, he illustrates the beautiful scenery while also hinting at the underlying danger in the experience. Mark Twain would be proud, I think. I already can't wait to read his finished story.



"Okay class, before we get started today, who can tell me what we have learned so far?" I ask the room at large.

"Show don't tell!" someone half shouts.

"That's right. And what does that mean?" I am looking around and am met with several confident looks, as if they know the answer but don't want to be the first to speak.

Finally, someone offers "Um, like describing things in ways that puts the reader in the head of the narrator?"

"Excellent. What else do you remember from that lesson?" I prod.

"Try to describe things without *to be* verbs."

"Yes! And remind me what *to be* verbs are?"

"Am!" someone sort-of shouts.

I motion for more, then hear a chorus of conjugated *to be* verbs: "was," "were," "is," and so on.

"You got it. Great. And what happens when we try to avoid to be verbs? Who can explain it to me?"

"We have to use more creative verbs."

"Active verbs, that is right. Good work." I pace back and forth at the front of the room while we talk. "What else have we learned so far?"

"Dialogue," this from a girl on the front row.

"Perfect. Now class, please tell me everything you remember from the dialogue lesson."

The class then jumps in with slips of information they remembered from the dialogue lesson about characterization, formatting, dialect, and so on.

"You're doing great. Now, we're going to learn about combining these two elements: dialogue *with* show don't tell."

To demonstrate what show don't tell with dialogue looks like, we read the first several pages of Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, then pick it apart to identify key passages, discuss the affect on us as readers, and what we learn about the characters' traits and situations from these pages. I notice how one particular student, one of the athletes in the back that I didn't reach easily, for some reason really starts to engage in this conversation with me and his peers.

You never know when something will click with a student, I guess, until you try different approaches.

That evening I can't stop the grin that spreads across my face as I read Turner's show don't tell with dialogue practice, from her experience acting on the stage:

> "*Those boys'll eat…" The menacing song paired with us rocking side to side, arm in arm, created an effect like the rocking of a ship. Dressed in tattered, striped shirts and armed with cardboard knives and dirty bandanas on our heads, each of us fell into character easily. I could barely keep the smile off my face.*
>
> *"That poison cake and one by one…" Hook passed by each of us and knocked us down in beat to the song, if by knocking down equals each dropping with as much dramatics as we could muster.*
>
> *"They'll DIE! Hahaha!!" Popping up like groundhogs, we all rejoined Hook to finish.*

The dialogue is directly from the play she is in, yes, but her unique experience as an actress in the play sparkles in a way that makes me, the reader, feel the happiness of the moment in her life she is conveying.

Enchanted, is the word that comes to mind as I read these lovely scraps of stories – flashes into the experiences of these brilliant students.

After reading the first two pages of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum," I ask the class "How would you describe the tone of this passage?"

"Dark."

I nod in agreement. "Any other words to describe the tone?"

Words are tossed out like “scary” and “mysterious.”

“Okay, now in your groups comb through this passage. Pluck out words and phrases that set this dark tone you are describing.” After a time, I ask them to share what they have come up with.

“Sick!” a few chuckles.

“Dread.”

I nod and motion for the class to keep going.

“Grotesqueness.” Excellent; Poe was really good at setting a dreary tone. They continue: “writhe,” “human torture,” “delirious horror,” and on they continued.

“Good. Good work. Now, let’s read the first two pages of JRR Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. Pay attention to the contrast in tone here compared with Poe’s writing.”

After the class decides that Tolkien’s writing is much happier than Poes, they identify words and phrases that set that brighter tone, words like “comfort,” “neighbor,” “good-natured faces,” “deep fruity laugh,” and so on.

Then, I share an excerpt from my own writing and ask them to do the same examination of tone as before:

She stood on that dock overlooking the bayou, with the splintered wood scratching the soles of her feet, and reveled in the caress of the gentle wind on her face. The fireflies danced in happy sways, skimming across the onyx water. She remembered a time, long ago, when she could swerve and dip and twirl as gracefully as the bugs did. The basso rumble of thunder seemed like a drum in her heart that could scare away the remaining dim light of dusk. Darkness was

coming but for these diligent and brave fireflies in the slow breaths of wind,

ticking to their own scattered metronome and keeping her company.

"It's happy but sad at the same time," a student observes.

"Why do you say that?" I ask.

"Because there are like some happy things in it like dancing and fireflies but there is also a storm coming and the word 'darkness.'"

"Very insightful. Good work," I approve and say to the class, "the speaker here is obviously experiencing some complex emotions. We, humans, *are* complex and if your writing can demonstrate that, all the better. Now, I want you to think about your stories and the tone or tones you wish to set. Then make a list of different words and phrases that might help set the tone you want to communicate." I indicate for them to use the thesauri as needed and they begin writing.



At the beginning of class, we go over POV, or the narrator's point of view. We review present tense versus past tense and first-person versus third person. Obviously, there are several more POVs out there but I am trying to keep it simple in preparation for discussing what a "close POV" is.

"In a close POV, the narrator is intimately connected with the thoughts and feelings of the character, often demonstrated through inner monologue. Check out this example I drafted to show you the difference." I gesture to the board and read my typed examples aloud.

First-Person Past Tense POV: *I follow the map on my phone until the battery runs out.*

Close First-Person Past Tense POV: *The battery light flashed on my phone as I tried to zoom into the map details. There was supposed to be a path to turn right on the other side of that bridge. Had I missed it? Maybe it was covered with shrubbery. Honestly, the woods in the state park got out of hand like, twenty years ago. Sweat pooled on my upper lip as I tried to quicken my pace. That creepy tree looks familiar; I definitely passed it before. I looked down at my phone again, hating being lost, just as the screen went blank.*

We talk about both examples and the students have some practice writing time. Then we move on to talk about pacing.

"Authors bring attention to very important moments through pacing." To demonstrate pacing, we read excerpts from Cecelia Ahern's first chapter of *The Time of Our Lives*. "Okay, class, what exactly is being paced here?"

One of my baseball players in the back offers "Reading a note."

"That's right. Seeing a short note on the floor, picking it up, and reading it. How is that moment being paced, exactly?"

"Like, memories and descriptions and things," from a girl sitting by the window.

"Yes, the entire chapter is pacing out this one extremely tiny moment. In it, we get a description of the apartment that includes memories about the things in the apartment, like the cat and the burn on the carpet, and so on. Now think of your stories and decide on the *most important moment.* In your books, and using the *tone* list you wrote, practice pacing out that important moment. As you do, remember show don't tell, dialogue, and consistent close POV, all elements of creative writing we've been working on."

I play Rachmaninoff's *Six Pieces* and let them write. I listen to the lilting elegance of the music and wander the room, occasionally leaning over shoulders to glance at what my budding writers are working on.

I spot a poster hanging on the wall labeling letter grades, proclaiming that an "F" is "NOT SKIBIDI NO AURA." The irony is not lost on me, considering I am trying to teach students to use words creatively, that the language of *brain rot* may have infiltrated young minds and classrooms. But based off of these young minds' writing samples so far, all is not lost.

After a time, they swap drafts in their groups, giving and receiving feedback. I am very pleased with how things are going. Their conversations are active and engaging. Even students who seemed standoffish in the beginning are animated and, it seems, compelled to contribute in a positive way. I hope it translates well when they transfer their handwritten exercises into their typed drafts. That night, as I read through their writing exercises, I am charmed by their initial capturing of tone and pacing.

Ivan, a young man from Kansas who had never experienced anything like this, wrote about the first moment he encountered a waterfall while hiking in the mountains:

> *The water crashed into every rock imaginable. As it flowed down I couldn't hear anything besides the water thrusting itself into anything and everything. With each and every step I took I felt a sense of relief emerging into my body. I had never seen or heard something so mesmerizing. Out of the corner of my eye I finally saw the source of the river: the waterfall. The loud roaring sounds of the waterfall pounding on top of itself. Every other noise was drowned out of my head…*

From this passage of pacing the moment he discovered the sights and sounds of a waterfall up close, his sense of wonder is communicated, as is a sense of gratitude for the chance to have this experience. With his repeated use of the word *every*, I get a sense of the all-encompassing aspect of the experience he is trying to convey, in the language of someone only just beginning to creatively examine this moment from his life.

It reminds me of an experience hiking Mt. Wheeler in New Mexico when in my teens. Somehow the word majestic comes to mind while also being wholly inadequate in conveying the heart-thrilling wonder of claiming nature's time on a mountaintop.

My breath gets caught in my throat a little when I read Hope's pacing exercise of looking at her front yard just after being told their family would be moving again soon; her father is a soldier and she is well acquainted with the grief of leaving a place. But this place was the home of her heart.

> *I stepped outside before anyone could stop me and let the front door shut behind me. Heat wrapped around me instantly, thick and familiar. The North Carolina sun bounced off the windows of the house I still wanted to pretend belonged to me. The porch rail felt warm against my clammy hand. The driveway curved down the petite hill in front of me, the same twisted, steep driveway my parents complained about every time they had to back out of it. For one suspended moment, everything still looked like home. Out of every house I lived in, this one held the most of me…*

I feel a pressure on my chest as my heart squeezes a little with these words. I remember similar feelings of sadness when compelled to say goodbye to a place or person or chapter of my life. Sometimes we don't even realize we *are* saying goodbye at the time. Those can be the

hardest, because we're still supposed to keep going, as if a piece of us isn't broken. Hope provides readers with enough details about the weather and the driveway and her parents' frustration with it that we can be there with her, in her head, as she experiences it again through the writing of it. As we experience it through her words, we react and are reminded of our own experiences that invoke similar feelings.



I greedily open up my laptop and click open the digital files to read the typed first drafts. The students were required to have at least three pages for me to work with on the first drafts; most have turned in more than six pages…then I open Gemma's seventeen pages!

Her story speaks of how she was diagnosed with a blood condition, the events leading up to it, the support from her family, and how she found healing. She takes several moments to describe the smaller experiences during this time of her life, such as when a nurse is administering a blood test:

> *As she grabbed the needle, I turned my head away again and closed my eyes, bracing myself for the poke in my arm. I really didn't like seeing needles going into my skin. After a few seconds, I felt the stab of the needle entering my vein...*

I pause several times while reading this story. I suppose I should have expected someone in the junior class to write about a medical issue but this one hit "close to home," as they say. It felt like I was reading my life, but experienced through another. At her same age I was also very sick and diagnosed with a rare blood condition that has greatly impacted my life. I acutely relate, as she explains an interaction she had with someone who didn't understand her situation:

> *...if I got hit too hard on the head or body, it would give me internal bleeding. I went to track practice but wasn't allowed to run or pole vault. I just sat there in*

the shade of the concession stand in jealousy and watched everyone else practice their events. It wasn't fair. It felt as if I was being punished for doing absolutely nothing.

"Gemma, why aren't you running?" one of the freshman boys jeered rudely.

"I have an autoimmune disorder where if I fall or get cut, I could get internal bleeding, and if I start bleeding, it wouldn't stop and I would die," I answered with a straight face.

"Oh," he said. That shut him up.

Reading her experiences about this connects with my own personal lived experiences in a way that I wasn't prepared for. I think that anyone could read her story and feel connected to times when they felt scared, misunderstood, limited, and/or ill. But when *I* read her story, even though my illness and situation is completely different than hers, involuntarily the words fly from my mouth: "She's writing my life."

I ask Gemma about the meaning she made of the experience. "Did you figure anything out as you were writing, in terms of how you thought about it or felt about this happening to you?"

After a beat, she says "It definitely made the experience a whole lot more vivid in my brain. After writing it down I feel like I have processed it a little bit better. It was a really big event and I think after writing about it, it simplified it a little bit. Letting people be inside my head, even if no one's going to read it, meant something to me."

"Someone's going to read it" I reassure her. "*I* connected with it."



As I finish reading through the first drafts, I am delighted and heartbroken and scared and feeling the feelings that my students describe in their stories. It is lovely and I can't help but feel a little like a "proud mama," at their overall sincere and talented approach to this assignment. I leave them feedback to help guide their revision efforts, comments that are very specific for each individual student and piece of writing. Then I send their commented-on drafts back to them to see what they do with it and how they improve on their final drafts.

On the final drafts, there are students who do minimal revisions. But there are also students whose writing is unmistakingly enhanced by applying the feedback. Hope – the soldier's daughter, for example titles her story "The House We Carry," a beautiful allusion to Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried,* and writes about her sister finding out they would be moving soon:

> *"My senior year?" she questioned heartbreakingly as the words left her lips. She didn't yell that time. She barely even said it above a broken breath.*
>
> *The words hung in the kitchen heavier than all the shouting had.*
>
> *"You're asking me to leave my senior year?"*
>
> *My heart immediately broke for her.*

She is talking about her sister here, but for the line "my heart immediately broke for her," I want her to focus on *her* experience here. So, the feedback I give her for this passage is: "What does this look like and feel like, for you? Show don't tell your experience here through a close POV." Then, in her revision, she adds:

> *Something in me caves at the sound of her voice, like I had just watched something fragile shatter and I couldn't do anything to stop it. I wanted to say something.*

Anything.

I just stood there, useless, feeling the weight of her words press into my ribs with nowhere to go.

In her revised lines, she poignantly describes how her sister's sadness is impacting her. In the revision, she captures in words that we feel when we are sad for someone but don't feel like there is anything we can do to make things better. Instead of stopping at describing her *perception* of someone's pain, she explains her own. Empathy, captured beautifully.

Then I open Turner's "The Magic of the Theatre," and a wave of delight snags me as I see the many revisions she made in her final draft; she really took to the feedback I left her. In her first draft, she is conversing with her mom about the possibility to sign up for theatre camp:

"So do you want me to sign you up?" Expectation flickered in my mom's eyes.

"Ummmm…" I noticed how the floor seemed to be particularly covered in fur.

"I need an answer."

"I don't know!"

I left her feedback on the line about the floor covered in fur by asking "What does this mean? Describe what that looks like in a little more detail (and how you feel about your surroundings as you're thinking). Also, are you avoiding answering? If so, you might stall a bit more, too, with inner monologue." In her finished draft, she turns that one line into a compelling paragraph:

"Ummmm…" I noticed how the floor seemed to be particularly covered in fur from Lucy, our basset hound, today. Lucy was the best. Before her I hadn't liked being around any kind of puppy, they were always yippy and had too much energy. When I first met Lucy, we laid together on the floor for what felt like

hours. We never stopped doing that. Oh and the ceiling had an odd discoloration in the corner. The spot had been there since we moved in. My siblings and I had made a game of trying to guess what the stain might be, or it had started that way. Eventually, we just began coming up with more and more elaborate stories on how it got there. A man was murdered and his body was stuffed in the attic and the stain was the only clue to his killer. A slime monster had risen out of the kitchen sink and terrorized the house before exploding all over. A secret ooze had burst from a canister and transformed the previous owners into mutants and they had to move so they could go fight crime. We really needed to stop basing all of our guesses off of movies.

"I need an answer."

This enchanting mind-ramble, as she tries to avoid committing to something new that she is nervous to try, gives us readers a window into her home, her mind, and the dynamics between her and her siblings as well as her mother. Later in her story she, she begins to describe beginning theatre camp by stating: *A camp leader stood inside beside a table filled with the promise of the many different people I'd no doubt have to interact with. I hated talking with other people.* So, the feedback I give her here is: "I assume this is a busy situation with people and movement. How can you describe it, and possibly incorporate a bit of dialogue you are hearing from these strangers as they interact with each other?" In her revision, she adds:

"Hi! Can I get your name?" The camp leader, a man with a beard more gray than brown, asked. His face and voice both bellied a friendliness to him, but it was hard to tell for sure from my tactical position pressed against my mom.

"That's her right there." My mom replied as she gestured to my name tag near the edge of the table.

"Well, hello then! Why don't you put on your name tag and then I'll give you your bag and we'll send you on your way. Everyone's going to be on the stage which is just down the hall to the left and up those stairs."

He handed me a drawstring bag full of items I could only guess at. As I put on my name tag, Momma gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"Have a great time sweetheart. I'll pick you up at five, okay?" It wasn't really a question.

"Okay." It was certainly not.

The dialogue enriches this moment, demonstrating the actions and movements happening. I get a feel for her relationship with her mom, her shy feelings of meeting someone new who is kind, and her comfortability in the new situation. All so much more relatable than the first draft.

Wanting to find out more about her process, I ask her "can you tell me how you feel about your writing in this experience?"

"It was very freeing and open. Like, whatever came into my mind I was allowed to just put it down and could change it later but I was allowed to just be creative with it." She blinks at me through round rimmed glasses and tucks a strand of chestnut hair behind one ear.

"Did you find yourself altering or adjusting or complicating your writing in any way based off of the feedback that you got, either from me or from your classmates during the smaller activities?"

"Definitely," she responds with an affirmative nod. "I would say there were certain parts I just wrote down but I realized, looking at feedback, I realized I could expand more on what I saw, what happened rather than just the simplified version."

"It's almost like the feedback gave you permission to –"

"It gave me a chance to go on a rant." Her smile is wide and infectious.



Deciding to lean into writing about connections to family and heritage, Elsa's final draft, "Más Que Un Hogar," is more of an expression of love for her family and heritage than a story with a beginning, middle, and end. My student who at first couldn't find the words, certainly found her voice with powerful impact:

> *Family is so important and such a huge thing in our culture. My parents came from Mexico, my mom came to help her family and my dad came to live a better life and to give me and my siblings a good place to grow up in.*
>
> *My mom: Yo tenía que trabajar para mandar dinero a mi casa.*
>
> *My dad: Yo quería tener un mejor futuro, y yo quería trabajar y vivir aquí. They made so many sacrifices by leaving their family behind, leaving the only place they knew, and going to a place that was completely different than what they were used to. Even now they make so many sacrifices for me and my family. For example, my dad works really hard, he'll leave for weeks even a month at times just to provide for his family. I never really got to experience a lot of things girls usually do with their dads. He would miss some important events because most of the time he would be at work.*

As I read, I feel the longing for a more present father while also embracing the clear gratitude she has for his hard work and sacrifices. Elsa speaks of the Mexican culture, her family's Catholic faith, and even the food:

> *My mom also makes very traditional Mexican dishes like flautas, enchiladas, caldo, ensalada de pollo, and so much more. I always love eating the food she makes, it tastes so good and the smells that go through the house are amazing.*
>
> *My mom: ¡Mira te hice enchiladas!*
>
> *Me: ¡Son mis favoritas! ¡Gracias ma!*
>
> *My mom: ¡Si! Si quieres más aquí están. (She points to the stove.)*
>
> *Me: ¡Está bien, gracias!*
>
> *We don't like to get flour tortillas from the store because my mom says they don't taste the same like the ones from Mexico and I personally just don't like them compared to my moms, she makes the best flour tortillas, I will only eat hers. I have always been proud of my Mexican roots, I mean who wouldn't, we have amazing food, fun traditions, and a cool language.*

I note how she spends so much effort making her parents present in her writing, both of them. Her connection with them illustrates her point: that a major part of her culture is the love within family units and the different ways that love is shown, in these cases through hard work and good food.

When talking to her, I ask how she feels about the story she turned in.

"I struggled a little bit with…well I tried to explain it but I couldn't explain it."

"Was there a language barrier?"

"Yeah."

"I know there were a couple of times when you struggled with finding the right words. Was that the reason? Like, if you were explaining it in Spanish would it come easier to you?"

"Writing for me has always been hard in English. I don't know a lot of big words and how to express myself on paper."

"I can understand that. Considering that you feel these kinds of restrictions or limitations," she is nodding, "can you compare the experience of creative writing verses essay writing? What are your thoughts comparing the two types of writing?"

"Honestly, I really liked creative writing a lot better. It helped me express myself more."

I ask Elsa if she made any meaning, or what her feelings were, when thinking about her lived experiences and putting them into words in a way that represents her understanding.

"Writing it made me *see*," she says. "My dad was gone for work a long time and I always knew about it and I guess looking back, I wrote it down and read it to my mom and I started crying." She goes on to talk about how hard it is when he is gone. "It wasn't bad but I went through something." Her voice wabbles and her eyes are glassy with unshed tears.

"You went through something," I echo "and it helped shape you into the young woman you are now, in meaningful ways." I want her to feel validated.

She nods vigorously and wipes her eye.

"I love how you read this to your mom. I bet she was feeling something when you read it to her."

Her immediate smile could melt an ice berg. "Yeah, she really liked it. She said I did really good. Honestly, I think I could have done a little bit better. I just didn't really know how to place words or get more words into it. But she didn't really have an education in high school so in her eyes she thought I did really *really* good." She laughs self-deprecatingly.

But I am even more impressed with every revelation. She doesn't realize that she is speaking with someone who also did not finish high school. This is a story I have not shared with them yet.

She goes on to express how her mom told her how she has "come a long way," with her writing and that she "did a really good on the parts about heritage, that everything was spot on." She is rightfully proud of herself, but she isn't finished. "Honestly, I think it made more of a connection the way I wrote, to me. It made me see more of my heritage, what happened to my family and things like that."

"Are you saying that creative writing made you see more of your family situation and your heritage, appreciate it more and understand it more?"

With a wide smile she nods her head. "Yeah. The more I wrote the more I think I realized."

Amazing. She is the poster child for finding her voice, and being proud of it, when allowed to step outside of prescriptive essay writing expectations and write creatively.



I get to Melvin's story, titled "The Lost Marina," and am held captive by the vivid descriptions and intriguing dialogue. He describes his family driving around on vacation, arguing about what to do until they stumble across an out-of-the-way marina. Then, as I read, I get to have another close encounter with a shark:

> *Suddenly before we got to finish our conversation Tyler yelled out from the end of the dock post, "Melvin, let's jump off!"*
>
> *Without hesitation I ran down to look at the jump.*
>
> *"Damn, this is pretty high. Let's do it."*

I started to climb up to the top of the post at the end of the dock above the water.

"Hold on," Tyler paused, "what was that?"

I took a second glance into the water to see what he was talking about. It looked clear. A few seconds passed… nothing. Then a dark flash came into sight and then blurred back down too deep to see. Then I saw what he was talking about. Every few seconds it happened again. A small streak of grey would swim up toward the surface and run back down again. It all made sense. A marina. All the dead fish, all the scales and scraps. They were sharks. It was the perfect place for sharks to hangout.

"Yeah, let's not jump in here. Let's go find Hank."

Drawn in as I read, I hold my breath until I know that he isn't jumping into the water with the sharks. I keep reading to learn that he and his brother retrieved fish from a nearby fisherman to try to lure in one of these dangerous sea monsters. Heaven help the adventurous spirit of young people. My heartrate flip flops as I take in the lines he casts:

There was a sudden flash of a dark shadow past the end of my bait just piercing the smooth glassy top on the water. I felt a sudden bump on my line and the smooth finish on the water's surface quickly became a splashing, wavy torrent and I lost the ability to see myself looking back at me on the mirror-like surface. The line pulled and my muscles strained, and I felt power on the other end much stronger than my own. I pulled up on the line and my arms tried to thrash back down. It was the moment I had been waiting for. My heart beat rose immediately and blood began to pump harder and faster through the veins in my arms which turned them into bulging waterways expanding under my skin. I smiled. The rope

started to slip though my wet hands. I gripped harder and slowly lifted up. A dark, shiny head emerged from the surface. Millions of jagged white teeth, each with hundreds of mini white saw blades surrounding the edge of each individual tooth, held the barracuda [bait] half way up its body. The eyes, black and filled with nothing, appeared to contain a message. It was the message of an animal misjudged. An animal that I had nothing for except fascination.

In Melvin's passage I see the beautiful connection he is making with the terrifying shark.

I ask Melvin to tell me about his moment with the shark.

"It's such a strong, fierce animal," he starts. "But it's just another living creature. It's just another animal. I've been going to the ocean forever now and I've swam with sharks. I think they're super cool and not like what people think of them as. Yeah, they can be strong and they can be fierce but they're not out to get you like some people think."

"Melvin, can you please share your thoughts about this experience of learning creative writing skills and applying it to one of your lived experiences?"

He explains how it is different from writing essays. "Learning how to describe things in that much detail and put people inside my head," he gestures with his fingers by his temple "made me express what I actually thought more and what was inside my brain with everything around me. Even with the dialogue I kinda made it to where it seemed like you could tell what I thought about the other people around me." He reiterates "in those moments I was able to put people inside my head."

Referencing the concept of learning creative writing in regular English classrooms he says "I think it should be taught because I always liked writing but I never loved writing formally that much and I never learned how to write in that creative style like a book would be

in. I thought it was really fun and actually kinda important cause you're able to express what's in your head more than just learning formatting and stuff."

In his adolescent colloquialisms he captures the essential difference between essay writing and creative writing. Essay writing relies on facts, research, and analysis. Creative writing communicates the heart of the human experience and understanding.

I think sometimes we educators, and society at large, treat adolescents a little like Melvin's misunderstood shark. We see them as a bit unruly, perhaps wild or scary, and in that judgement fail to see their very real emotions and adult-like perspectives. We miss their growing-up-ness and the beautiful colors they put into the world, the way they make sense of their realities. Their world *is* our world. We *are* them.

Like ouroboros, we live our experiences and then experience them again and again. Mirrored in others and in the remembering, our humanity clings to what we know – what we have lived through and therefore also create. From the writings of Hongsheng[1], "Life evolves like the motion of waves. New waves slowly push the old waves to the shore. […] Do not patronize anything old [or anything young]. There is no reasonable definition of what is new or old." When we look into the eyes of the sharks that face us, we find that *we* are sharks, doing our best in this life – trying to understand and *be* understood.

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[1] Yao Hong Sheng, or Yangzi Yao Hongsheng, was a prominent physician for the emperor of China, in the 1920's pre-revolution. He often wrote his thoughts in poetic form. The translation provided here was done by his youngest daughter, Yao Lien Hill. Her translations of his writing demonstrate the beautiful cycle of expressive language creating meaning and making room for others to create meaning. These writings were released to family and friends upon her death during the writing of this essay, in 2026 – further compounding meaning through creative expression. We miss you, Yoa Lien, and we love you.

Chapter 5 - A Case for Normalizing Creative Writing in ELA Classrooms

The findings chapter brought to light the experience of being a 2-week visiting instructor in a secondary ELA classroom with the express purpose of teaching tenets of creative writing and having the students apply that instruction to telling a story from their lived experiences, i.e. nonfiction, personal narrative writing. It also explored the meanings they made of those experiences as well as the meanings they made in the act of learning to *tell* their stories through the creative nonfiction writing medium. It examined how students applied classroom instruction and individual feedback in the telling of their stories. Overarchingly, it explored the authentic meaning that *I*, the researcher, made of the experience. This chapter will detail additional findings that did not place well within the artistic aesthetic of the findings section but nonetheless informed components of the study, explore an interpretation of the findings, and discuss the bigger implications inferred from the findings and analysis. The driving argument in this chapter is the importance of normalizing personal narrative writing through the vehicle of creative writing curriculum in ELA classrooms.

Study Rationale

Personal narrative writing is a component of nonfiction creative writing, providing important opportunities for self-reflection (Martin, et al. 2021), expression of emotion and perspective (Donlin, 2020), as well as exploration of meaning making connected to the experiences of our lives (Brockmeir, 2009). Personal narrative writing also quintessentially manifests autonomous learning given how it invites each students' unique perspective, preferences, and experiences into the curriculum (Vaughn, 2024). In addition to the personal enrichment of learning creative writing, research iterates that it benefits students' overall

confidence in writing along with boosting their academic performances across the disciplines (Graham, 2014).

Unfortunately, far too few preservice ELA teachers learn creative writing skills and therefore far too few secondary students are given that opportunity as well (Altier, 2022). This pedagogical gap is most likely driven by a lack of support from state administrators, given that components of creative writing are either absent or grossly neglected in state-wide core standards, i.e. the curriculum objectives teachers must attend to with their students (Hellmann, 2021; KSDE, 2025). Moreover, leaving out the important component of creative writing in ELA classrooms further marginalizes disenfranchised voices (Shay & Wickes, 2017), among student populations. Exploration of aesthetic expression needs to be prioritized in learning spaces (Barone & Eisner, 2012), because it better realizes self-fulfillment and well-rounded individuality within students and teachers alike.

Theoretical Framework

The guiding theoretical framework conceptually woven into the study to enable autonomous learning (Maydew, 2025), includes expressivism enabled by self-determination theory (SDT) and social cognitive theory (SCT). Writing our lived experiences enables us to choose the event we write about, decide what it means to us, and then decipher how best we can represent that meaning though language (Mack, 2015). Individual perspectives are made up of collective contexts including multiple subjectivities and outside influences (Bandura, 1989), which SCT teaches. We intersect our understandings of ourselves with comprehension of the world around us, or rather, our perception of the world around us and by so doing make sense of our lives. While we absolutely reflect our communal and familial influenced subjectivities, we also work through our life moments and decide for ourselves what they mean and how to frame

them, manifesting SDT. Writing narratives of life experience fosters a "broader understanding of self-identity" (Bauer, 2018, p. 89). Therein SDT philosophically iterates that we make sense of life events by situating them within a context of meaning. Combining SDT with SCT, we grant the writer full control over the content while also acknowledging the fellow humans who contributed to either the experience being written about and/or the actual writing of the experience – all of which culminates in expressivism (see Figure 2.2).

To help navigate meanings in life events and the great self vs. society tension, expressivism seeks to break down the binary between the self and the other, i.e. the private/public disconnect (Roeder et al., 2015, p. 8). For when we unveil our inner understandings, the separation between ourselves and others crumbles. Expressivism prioritizes writer imaginative and emotive development as well as how that evolution manifests through "individual consciousness and social behavior" (Burnam, 2001, p. 19). Through collaborative writing activities, and the communities in the subjects of their writing, while making individual meaning out of the experiences they wrote about, these students applied social cognitive theory as well as self-determination theory in the participation and execution of their narrative stories. Their stories written in creative fashion, and the actions contributive to viewing these students as valid authors, embody the bedrock of expressivism.

Study Overview

This is an arts-based research (ABR) endeavor; the study is artistic in nature, with strong emphasis on aesthetic and audience pedagogically, exploratively, analytically, and in the crafting/presentation of the findings. ABR considers an aesthetic approach to understanding meaning (Barone & Eisner, 2012), weaving together the "artistic-self and the researcher-self with the researcher and audience and researcher and teacher" (Leavy, 2020, p.3). ABR is not a

supplement in addition to research; it *is* research that explores the capability and affect of aesthetic expression.

The purpose of the study was to explore the following research questions:

1. How do secondary students engage with and represent their lived experiences during creative nonfiction writing instruction in the classroom?
2. How do students describe the impact of creative nonfiction instruction on their sense of voice as writers?

The components of creative writing focused on in the study include "show don't tell," characterization through dialogue, consistent close point of view (POV), tone, active verbs, pacing, peer collaboration, instructor feedback, and revising. These lessons are all described in detail in chapter 3 and in the appendixes. The basic structure of the creative writing lessons (see Figure 2.4) include:

1. Reading professional writings that embody the respective tenets to be worked on.
2. Discussion and analysis of the professional writing.
3. Basic instruction in the tenets with practice exercises for the students.
4. Collaborative time with their classmates and time to work on their individual pieces.
5. Feedback from the instructor that asked them to further develop their thoughts and expression, avoiding comments about superficial mechanical/grammar errors.
6. Opportunity to revise the writing based off of the collaborative and instructor feedback.

At the end of the experience, students submitted revised, finished drafts of their stories and filled out questionnaires about the 2-week experience. Six students were interviewed as well.

I also kept a journal every day of the study, taking note of my interactions with the students as well as descriptions and overall daily impressions. Member checks were performed to make sure the students, and their words, were appropriately and sufficiently represented.

After reviewing the handwritten exercises, comparing the first and final drafts, and going over the questionnaire responses, I took time to consider my own authentic meaning-making during this process, as part of a reader response analytical approach to the student writing and the experience overall. I then crafted my own creative nonfiction representation of the findings (see chapter 4) to represent my perspective and analysis of the experience.

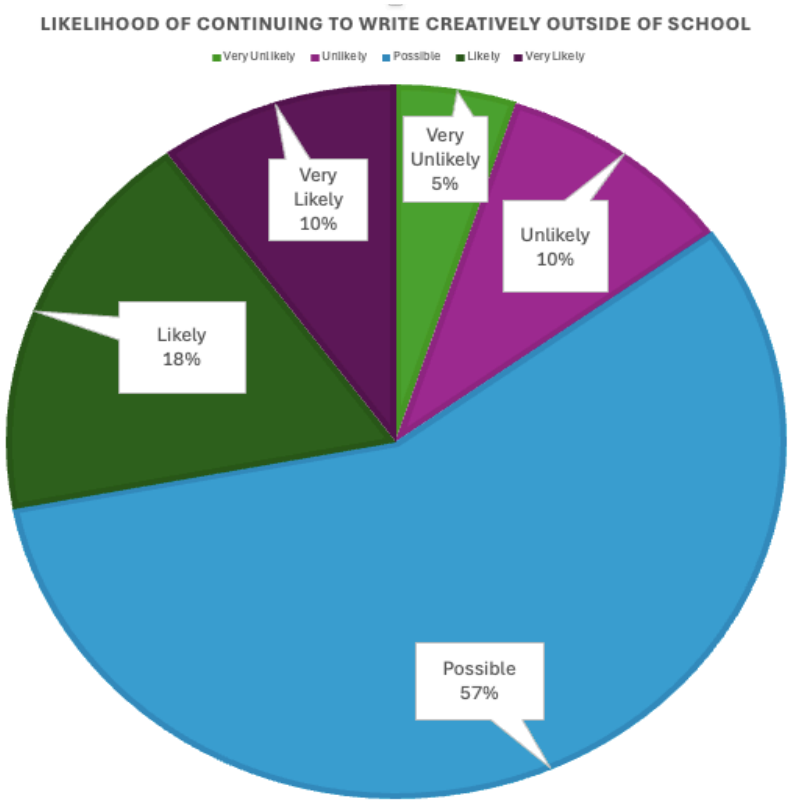
Data Generation & Analysis

The qualitative data generated includes various stages of student writing, participant researcher journal entries, questionnaire responses, and participant interviews. The student writing samples began as handwritten exercises, practicing the various tenets of creative writing demonstrated in the lessons, then evolved into typed first drafts of their stories. After extensive typed feedback from myself, the students were given several days to revise and complete their stories before the final submission of their finished drafts. Their writing samples were examined through an expressivist lens, putting heavy emphasis on the writers' words as representative of their meanings. A reader-response approach was executed in the analysis of the student writing, in which I as the reader acknowledge my subjective nature in the reading of their stories, interacting with their writing based off of my own aesthetic and lived experiences (Momeni, et al., 2026). The data shows authentic humorous, sad, and truly beautiful creative demonstrations of how the students understand the moments of their lives they wrote about – the meanings they made out of these experiences they relived to write down in aesthetic fashion.

Data from Questionnaire

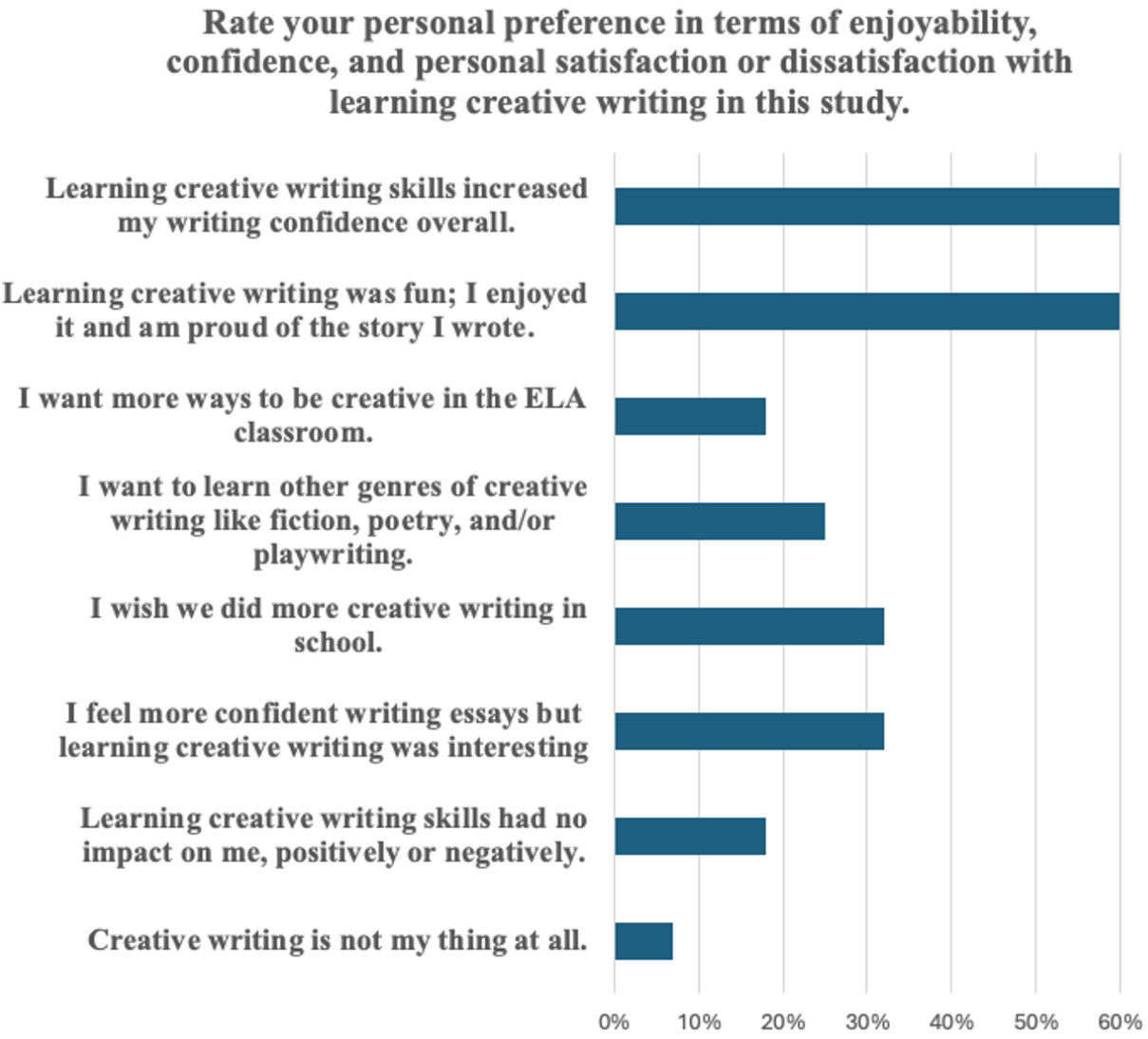
Questionnaires were distributed on the last day of the study to allow students not interviewed a chance to have their voices heard regarding the learning of creative writing. Being an arts-based research project, I will briefly review some of the aesthetic findings included in chapter 4. However, the statistical data collected from the questionnaires helped inform chapter 4 but is not specifically included therein, so first I will go over some of the questionnaire data here. All thirty-two students were given the chance to fill out the questionnaire anonymously; twenty-eight did so. Out of the twenty-eight respondents, eighty-five percent of them admitted that it was either possible, likely, or very likely that they would continue to write creatively on their own, outside of school (Figure 5.1), indicating strong self-fulfillment and enjoyability in the

Figure 5.1. *Pie Chart Indicating the Likelihood Students Claim of Desire to Continue Writing Creatively Outside of School*



creative writing process. Sixty percent agreed that learning creative writing is enjoyable and they are proud of the stories they produced and sixty percent also feel that learning creative writing skills helped increase their writing confidence overall (Figure 5.2). Thirty-two percent would like

Figure 5.2. *Rate of Preference & Enjoyability, Comparing Essay Writing to Creative Writing*



to see more creative writing in school. Nearly half of respondents agree that, if they had to choose just one of the lessons that improved their writing the most, learning "show don't tell," as a tenet of creative writing had the most impact. One-hundred percent of respondents say they adjusted or improved their writing based off of the feedback that they received either from

classmates during collaborative activities and/or from me, the instructor, on their handwritten exercises and typed first drafts.

On the anonymous questionnaires, some of the responses include the following statements, when describing the impact this study had on the writing of their stories and their perception of writing in general:

- *I loved learning how telling our own story is so special compared to other writing styles.*
- *I loved being able to reflect and write about something that was impactful and part of what makes me who I am today.*
- *It challenged my way of thinking and got me to be creative with how I wanted to word things.*
- *I think the part that impacted me the most was reliving the emotions I went through throughout my experience.*
- *I found that once I began writing, I couldn't stop. I feel like I just had more to say! It didn't feel like an assignment as much as something I was doing for myself.*
- *I liked the experience of being able to write a part of my life. I usually don't like writing but I enjoyed this. […] I think writing was fun for once I liked how I got to choose what I wrote about and how spread out it was.*
- *What I thought was a simple story of mine became a very deep and personal story.*

While a few of the respondents expressed either neutral or dissatisfied impressions of their time learning creative writing, the overwhelming majority made statements much like these noted above – declaratively positive statements describing how enriching and fulfilling the experience was.

Overview of Data Included in Chapter 4

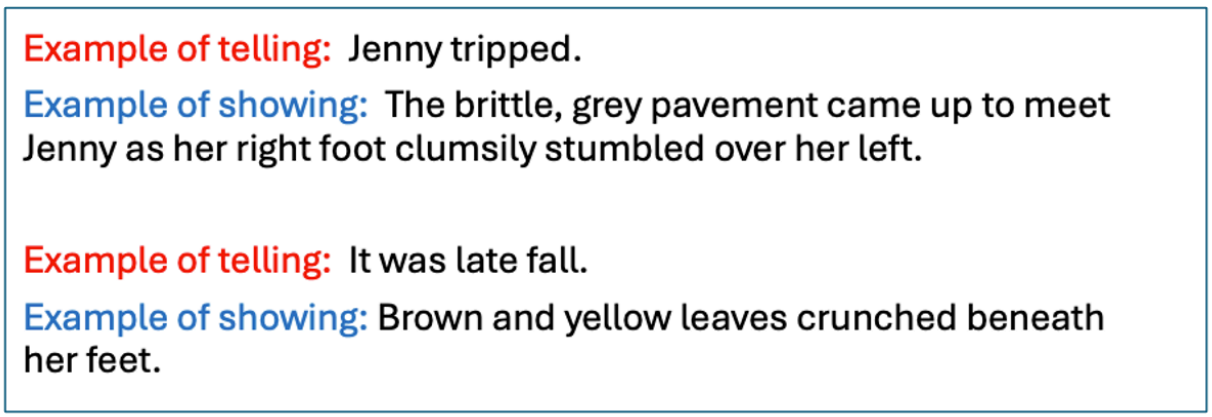
Sample writing from seven students were included in chapter 4. Each excerpt included in the findings was chosen to demonstrate specific stages of the study, i.e. handwritten exercises during the lessons, typed first drafts, and revised finished drafts. I also interviewed 6 students; excerpts from the conversations from 4 of those interviewed are included in chapter 4. I took notes in a journal every day that I was in the classroom, which helped me remember the

individual interactions I had with the students during each of the lessons as well as overall descriptions of the class, room, and experience. Notes from my journal helped inform the findings chapter, to help the flow of the piece read like I wrote it in the moment it was happening.

Briefly, we will review excerpts from a few of the lessons and student samples demonstrating how the students applied the creative writing lessons to their own lived experiences.

The application of tenets of show don't tell are present throughout the entire study. During the show don't tell lesson, we discussed active verbs, avoiding *to be* verbs, and descriptive language. We also went over multiple examples of what *telling* looks like vs. what *showing* looks like. To demonstrate here, the initial slide demonstrating show don't tell is shared (Figure 5.3):

Figure 5.3. *Slide Introducing Show Don't Tell*



Melvin, who described an experience fishing at a marina and encountering sharks, handwrote the following passage during our show don't tell lesson:

> *I lowered my line down into the teal fluorescent water that sparkled and teemed in the mid-day sun. I resisted with every ounce of strength as the water tried to pull me in, but I couldn't allow the teal, graceful ripples in the water to tempt me into*

the dark shadows circling and small tips of strong grey fins emerging from the outermost layer of the beautiful water.

In Melvin's writing sample, he clearly attempts to apply the conventions of show don't tell, using verbs like "lowered," "sparkled," "teemed," "emerged," and so on. He also uses descriptive language when discussing the water, with adjectives like "graceful," and "teal fluorescent." This passage is clearly more descriptive than summarizing the event with a bland phrase such as *I went fishing* because it puts readers right there with him, as he experiences this moment. In Melvin's own words, writing it gave him more satisfaction because he learned and applied language "like a real author writing a book." Both Melvin's application of the lesson and reminiscing during the interview express learning enrichment and self-satisfaction in his process and finished product.

An important component to learning the writing of a story is to learn how to shape and format dialogue. We therefore had a lesson emphasizing expression of character development, relationships between characters, and general situation vibes – relaying all of that by how and what characters say to one another in the story. Once we covered the basics of dialogue and show don't tell, we then had a lesson integrating both concepts into the writing.

When given time to write during the show don't tell with dialogue lesson, Turner explored an experience she had performing in a theatre camp thusly:

Dressed in tattered, striped shirts and armed with cardboard knives and dirty bandanas on our heads, each of us fell into character easily. I could barely keep the smile off my face.

"That poison cake and one by one…" Hook passed by each of us and knocked us down in beat to the song, if by knocking down equals each dropping with as much dramatics as we could muster.

"They'll DIE! Hahaha!!" Popping up like groundhogs, we all rejoined Hook to finish.

In this charming passage we see the humorous dialogue written into the play she is performing. With her mindful incorporation of show don't tell into the dialogue, readers get to experience performing with her. There are descriptions of the costumes and situation as well as how she felt. When interviewed, Turner described the experience of writing this story as "freeing" since she was allowed to write "whatever came into [her] mind." Again, we see a fulfilling learning experience found in learning and applying tenets of creative writing, as opposed to the sometimes-confining experience of having to "stay within the lines" while writing typical essays.

There are several more lessons and samples of student writing that could claim focus in this chapter (close and consistent POV, tone, pacing), however since it is much more thoroughly explored in chapter 4, we will instead finish the examples shared in *this* chapter with the application of feedback. We discussed during a lesson how important it is to collaborate during the writing process. This collaboration should happen during the developmental stages, informally, with peers and instructor, as well as in the finishing stages of a story. In this study, the culminating collaborative effort came in the form of me, the instructor, providing typed feedback on their first drafts and then giving them several days to revise their stories based on that feedback. The feedback I provided to all students avoided notations on grammar and instead focused on asking them open-ended,

guiding questions that encouraged them to further explore what the events in their story *meant* to them. An excellent example of this is found in Hope's revision. Hope is a soldier's daughter grieving the need to leave the home she loved and reconciling with beginning a new chapter of her life in another state. In her typed first draft, she provides the following dialogue of her sister questioning their parents:

> *"My senior year?" she questioned heartbreakingly as the words left her lips. She didn't yell that time. She barely even said it above a broken breath.*
>
> *The words hung in the kitchen heavier than all the shouting had.*
>
> *"You're asking me to leave my senior year?"*
>
> *My heart immediately broke for her.*

The feedback I gave her asked her to focus on *her* perspective during that conversation, even if she wasn't the one speaking. I typed on her draft the following: "What does this look like and feel like, for you? Show don't tell your experience here through a close POV." In response to that feedback, she added the following:

> *Something in me caved at the sound of her voice, like I had just watched something fragile shatter and I couldn't do anything to stop it. I wanted to say something.*
>
> *Anything.*
>
> *I just stood there, useless, feeling the weight of her words press into my ribs with nowhere to go.*

The feedback asked her to tap into her experience in that moment, instead of limiting it to what she perceived to observe from others. The revision is both heartbreaking and beautiful in its more developed form.

Though there are more from the writing samples and interviews integrated into chapter 4, some statements from the interviewees stand out in reference to their experience learning creative writing. Elsa, a bilingual daughter of immigrants from Mexico, explained how sometimes it was difficult to find the right words in English but that she felt that she was better able to express herself in creative writing as opposed to essay writing. Gemma stated that she was glad to have written her story of being diagnosed with a blood condition, to better hold her memory of the events. She stated that "it definitely made the experience a whole lot more vivid in my brain. After writing it down I feel like I have processed it a little bit better. It was a really big event and I think after writing about it, it simplified it a little bit. Letting people be inside my head […] meant something to me." Melvin described how learning creative writing helped him more than essay writing because he could "express what [he] actually thought more and what was inside [his] brain." Each of the writing samples and conversations in interviews express a student's sense of satisfaction and pride with what they were able to accomplish in telling their stories.

Creative Process

After the study at St. Mary's was complete, it was time for me to make something of it all in the form of my own artistic representation of the data/analysis for chapter 4. After a great deal of contemplation, I decided to do what I tell my students to do: start by examining what happened in the story and what meaning I made out of it. I reviewed my field research journal and the various phases of the student samples, choosing excerpts that stood out to me as particularly representative of various stages of the experience. I focused on excerpts that I personally connected with and that I felt could fit within my own writing aesthetic. Then, I concentrated on the concept of "show don't tell." I asked myself how I could best "show" the

experience of doing this study. With all of that in mind, and the student samples/excerpts from interviews chosen, I began typing out each day and phase of the study. After I had a completed first draft of chapter 4, I executed several rounds of editing, that spanned over multiple months, until I felt that I had aptly captured the study – what it meant to me and to my students.

Data Analysis and Findings

Examining the student writing samples, using a reader response analysis lens, compelled me to compare the feelings expressed and events they describe with my own lived experiences. I could not help but to relate to the humanity they exuded in their capturing of awe, sadness, fear, elation, and so on. There is something so very grounding about reading someone's experience and connecting with it personally – as if they allowed me to be in their heads while I reminisced on my own similar life experiences. The reciprocal flow of life and how we make meaning of our experiences, honoring that is the very authentic message that I received during this study and tried to capture in chapter 4 as the presentation of the findings and analysis.

In looking at the additional data that was not integrated into chapter 4, along with the information relayed in the interviews, we see a strong theme of creative writing curriculum, particularly with regards to personal lived experiences, as enriching and fulfilling to the students. One student noted how she felt that these particular assignments seemed like they were *for her*, instead of feeling like they were something she had to do for a grade or to impress a teacher. She states: "I found that once I began writing, I couldn't stop. I feel like I just had more to say! It didn't feel like an assignment as much as something I was doing for myself." Another student explains the difference between essay assignments and creative writing thusly: "I liked the experience of being able to write a part of my life. I usually don't like writing but I enjoyed this. […] I think writing was fun for once I liked how I got to choose what I wrote about." In

reference to meaning making, another student claims that "I loved being able to reflect and write about something that was impactful and part of what makes me who I am today." The majority of the student participants, 60%, overall express that they wrote a story that matters and that learning how to do so has made their writing process more enjoyable as well as given them deeper confidence in their writing overall. Even as much as 85% of the student participants claim that their experience learning creative writing in this way has left them with the impression of the desire and/or possibility of continuing to write creatively on their own, outside of the school setting. These are encouraging and compelling findings in making a case for the importance of normalizing creative writing as standard ELA curriculum.

Based off of the findings, in response to my original research questions, a reiteration of the questions and my synthesis of the answers are as follows:

Research Question 1: How do secondary students autonomously engage with and represent their lived experiences during creative nonfiction writing instruction in the classroom?

Synthesis Answer 1: Secondary students engage with and represent their lived experiences during creative nonfiction writing instruction in ways that are fulfilling, satisfying, endearing, and meaningful. Much like watering a dehydrated plant, they seemed to soak up the instruction and their writing bloomed under the attention. They just needed to be given instruction along with the time and space to find their creative writing voices. Autonomy was practiced in all stages of the study, starting from the stories they chose to share and ending with how they chose to revise their stories to best represent the meanings they made from the experiences.

Research Question 2: How do students describe the impact of creative nonfiction instruction on their sense of voice as writers?

Synthesis Answer 2: Students express the impact of finding their writing voices through learning creative nonfiction writing with words like "freeing," being "proud" of themselves, and it being a "meaningful" endeavor. Many of them relay feelings of enjoying it much more than essay writing while others feel that it helped them improve on their overall writing; they feel they will be better at essay writing now because of how they were allowed to explore language in new ways.

Implications

Teaching creative writing as standard curriculum in ELA classrooms should be adopted and normalized across state core standards and learning expectations. The overwhelming majority of students in this study claim that learning tenets of creative writing in connection with writing their personal narrative stories was both enriching and confidence building. Moreover, after examining their creative writing samples, it is obvious that when given the opportunity secondary students have a tendency to thrive in creative spaces. With the directive to write about their lived experiences, students make meaning from those experiences and learn more about themselves (Kersten, 2017). Creative writing has a tendency to build writing confidence overall (Bomer & Arens, 2020). Importantly, it also provides a positive learning experience which inherently increases learning (Brown, 2016). Simply put, creative writing is fun! Students learn more, and more effectively, when the curriculum and/or delivery of the curriculum is enjoyable (Sheeler, 2021).

Facilitating automatous learning through the manifestation of expressivism, social cognitive theory (SCT), and self-determination theory (SDT) establishes a concrete guiding philosophy for how to approach creative writing instruction in the ELA classroom in an education system that tends to prioritize easily quantifiable assessments (Collin, 2022), such as

test scores. Learning researching, memorizing, grammar, and quantitative skills are undoubtedly important, but there must be room for creative endeavors, too, for the making of well-rounded critical thinkers in our society (Bomer, 2021). Social cognitive theory (SCT) recognizes the collaborative element of both life and writing about life. Self-determination theory (SDT) leaves the meaning-making up to the author, who chooses what something means as they think about, relive, and write down their lived experiences. Expressivism, keeping SDT and SCT at the forefront, keeps emphasis on the author and how he or she uses language to express meaning.

Therefore, secondary ELA preservice teachers and seasoned teachers unfamiliar with creative writing tenets need to have the opportunity to be trained in creative writing pedagogy. Otherwise, it is like a mechanic learning how to fix a car without ever knowing how to build one. Or perhaps we can liken this instructional gap to a computer scientist never knowing how to write code, such as Java or HTML. The concept is silly but very much the reality for ELA teachers across the country. They are excellently trained in grammar, information literacy, and literature but the vast majority have never been taught to write creative literature on their own (Altier, 2022). If they were taught it, they would then feel more confident to teach it to their students in turn (Martin, et al., 2021). However, they are often limited to only teaching the state mandated standards and, as we explore in more detail in chapter 1, state core standards often neglect or entirely overlook any type of creative curriculum including writing (Dieckmann, 2020).

Limitations

A noted limitation of the study, as expressed by multiple participants, is that the 2-week duration was not long enough. To streamline our short experience with creative writing, I chose what I felt could be the most impactful components of creative writing, concepts that I believed

to make the biggest possible difference in their writing in the short time we had together. We focused our attention on just those components mentioned (i.e. show don't tell, dialogue, consistent close POV, tone, pacing, collaboration, feedback, and revision). However, the participants expressed that they would have liked more time to write, time to learn additional components to creative writing, and more time to focus on revisions. In my oversimplified opinion, there are three basic phases to learning an art form: 1.) learning what it is, to recognize it and the different elements that comprise it, 2.) learning the beginnings of how to mimic it in your own unique way, a process that involves a great deal of collaboration and trial/error, and 3.) taking the time and space to reflect on your art for the purpose of creating, revising, and improving it. Highlighting this limitation: a shortage of time in the study, is absolutely understandable because learning any art form takes time and patience – all of which are required for every phase of the art-learning process. When asked, some students iterated that they would have liked to work on the project for several weeks or an entire semester. Unfortunately, I could not be the visiting instructor for more than 2 weeks for logistical reasons.

One could also argue that the small size of the study is a limitation. Noticeably, the data leans heavily towards this study being a positive and beneficial experience. Perhaps with a larger study and sampling, there would have been a larger percentage of negative sentiments expressed by the students. However, the fact that the results were overwhelmingly positive is part of the point; to disregard the positive findings here would be a disservice to the people who contributed pieces of themselves in the data presented.

The absence of two additional points not included in this study could also be considered limitations: we did not track the impact of creative writing on other types of writing other than to ask students their perspectives of the individual impact and we did not look into the impact

learning creative writing has on grades across the disciplines. Though there is research to suggest that learning creative writing improves overall writing (Polman et al., 2021) as well as academic scores in other classes (Graham, 2014), this study did not explore those particular possibilities.

Conclusion

In an educational environment increasingly saturated with artificial intelligence (AI) detrimentally infiltrating student writing, fostering creative expression can and should be our salvation and priority. Use of AI in writing learning spaces reduces "complex human phenomena," such as meaning-making through narrative writing, to clinical, non-human accounts because AI texts convey "little emotional depth and the texts [are] distanced" (Kindenberg, 2024, pp. 10 &14). Instead of asking themselves how they feel or what they think about the subject/events in question, students "passively accept AI outputs, leading to a less personal tone and a diminished sense of perceived agency" in their writing (Fu, 2025, pp. 52-53). Yes, AI represents incredible innovation and possibilities but it is directly, negatively impacting learning expressive language and therefore is either muting or erasing writing voices across a broad scope.

However, if we encourage and teach creative writing, free from AI – as this study fosters, we can find our foothold into students learning the self-reflective, analytical, and expressive nature of cognizance that makes up the art of critical thinking. "Every technology has a philosophy which is given expression in how the technology makes people use their minds, in what it makes us do with our bodies, in how it codifies the world, in which of our senses it amplifies, in which of our emotional and intellectual tendencies it disregards" (Postman, 1989, p. 3). What if the new technology is actually asking us to *not* use our minds or our bodies? What if

the very components of our humanity that we capture in writing just doesn't happen anymore because AI sees to it for us? Except that it really can't capture our lived experiences as only *we* can ourselves.

Learning creative expression is our way through the AI quagmire of increasingly more lost voices. Creative writing must therefore be prioritized in preservice ELA teacher training and state-mandated curriculum standards. We must teach students to gather up all of the moments from their lives that matter to them, like pennies in a jar. Then sift through them, look at them closely, polish them with meaning they choose, and then convey them as the stories that make up who they are. Creatively. Beautifully. Seeing their value as individuals, constructing themselves into who they want to be.

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Appendix A - Lesson 1

Community Building

The following lesson begins the study with the junior class at St. Mary's. It includes introductions, explanations, and community building exercises.

Time: 46 minutes

Kansas Literacy Standard: SL 11-12.1c – Propel conversations that promote […] a divergent and creative perspective.

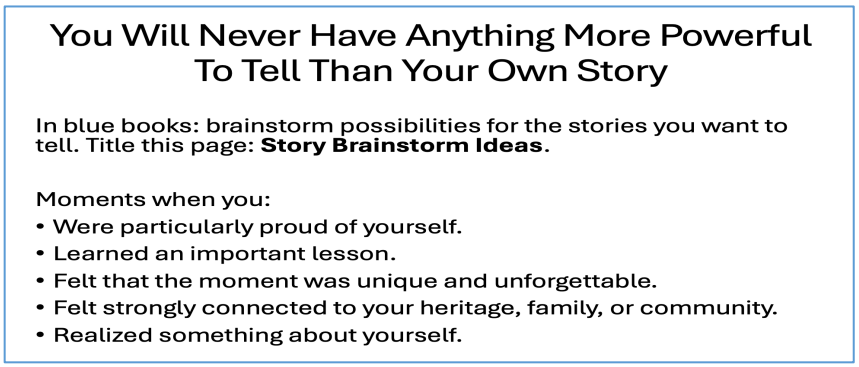
Objectives:

- Begin to build classroom writing community.
- Familiarize students with project.
- Collect assent forms from the willing.
- Explore verbal creative expression.
- Demonstrate intuitive listening skills.

Beginning: introduce myself and this study project. Pass out name plate cards. Have students write their names and draw aspects of themselves that they like or are proud of. Have each student introduce themselves and explain their card.

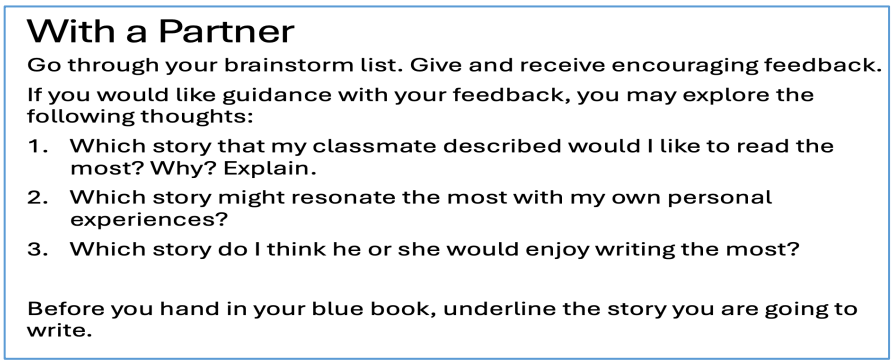
Middle:
Part 1 – tell a story from my life (how I got over my fear of sharks).
Part 2 - Ask students to brainstorm story ideas from their lives. Have them make a list of moments when they were proud of themselves, learned an important lesson, moments that were unique/unforgettable, moments when they realized something about themselves, and moments when they felt a strong connection to their heritage or family (see Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4 *Slide Displayed for Brainstorming*



Part 3 - Have students work in small groups, verbally sharing stories and giving/receiving feedback about which story to choose for this project (See Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5 *Slide Displayed for Collaborative Story Choosing*



End: Explain and pass out the assent forms. Collect forms from the willing.

Appendix B - Lesson 2

Dialogue

This lesson plan is the second in the series of this study and covers the evaluation of, creation of, and formatting of dialogue within a story.

Time: 86 minutes

Kansas Literacy Standards:

W. 11-12.3b – Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
RL. 11-12.3 – Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story.
RL. 11-12.5 – analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text […] and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

Objectives:

- Read and examine a complex text.
- Discuss characterization through dialogue.
- Learn dialogue formatting.
- Practice writing creative dialogue.
- Verbally exchange our creations.

Beginning: As a class, read chapters 1-2 in Gail Levine's *Ella Enchanted*

Middle:

1. Discuss characterization through dialogue. Provide following example, then pick apart all that we can learn about the characters from these 2 lines of dialogue.

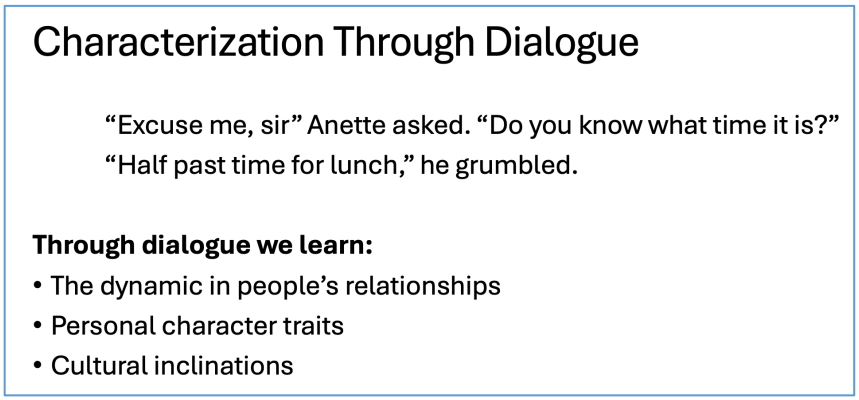
   "Excuse me, sir" Anette asked. "Do you know what time it is?"

   "Half past time for lunch," he grumbled.

   Some items that may arise include: she is polite, possibly from the south or in the military (based off of her manners), she does not have a phone or watch, might be outdoors, and is most likely an outgoing person to speak with a stranger. They do not know each other. He might be hangry, possibly of an older demographic (based off of his attitude/word

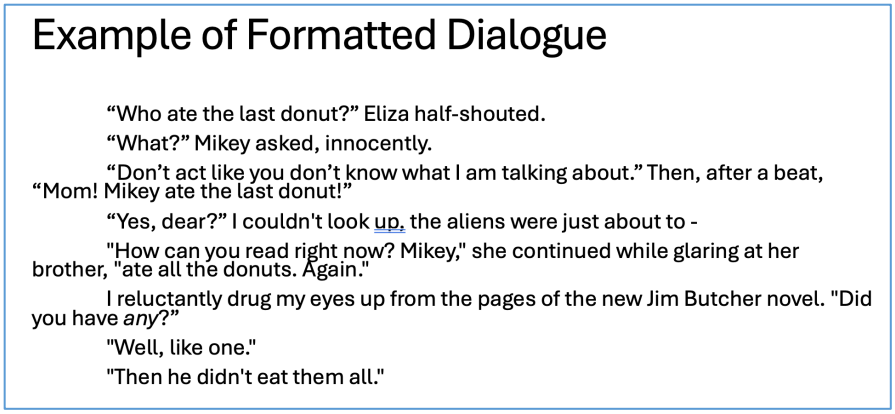
choice), is not shy about possibly being rude to a stranger. Discuss how we learned all of these things from these 2 simple lines (see Figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6 *Slide for Introducing Dialogue in a Story*



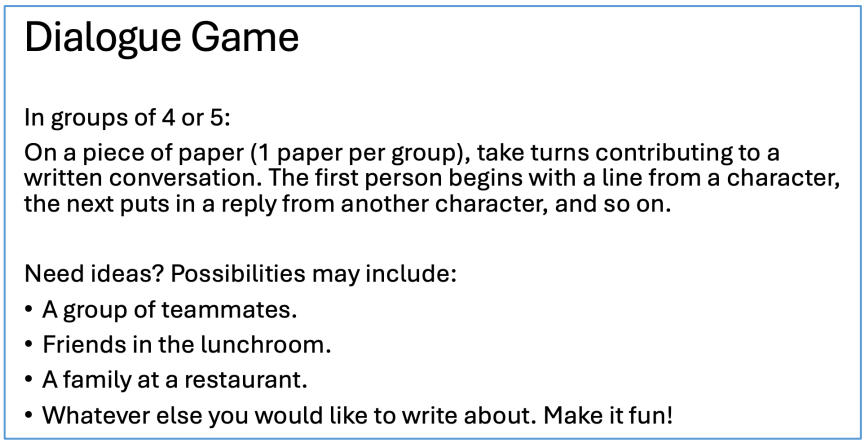
2. Direct the discussion to the reading. Ask students to identify what they learn from the characters in the story (as individuals and in their relationships to each other), just from what is said in quotation marks in the story.
3. Explain that, in our own stories, we may not remember every word that people said but out dialogue can reflect our relationships with them and their own personality traits, etc.
4. Demonstration the formatting of dialogue (the indentions and punctuations), in a hypothetical conversation – try to make it a humorous conversation (see Figure 5.7).

Figure 5.7 *Slide Demonstrating Formatting Dialogue*



5. Play the dialogue game in small groups (see Figure 5.8).

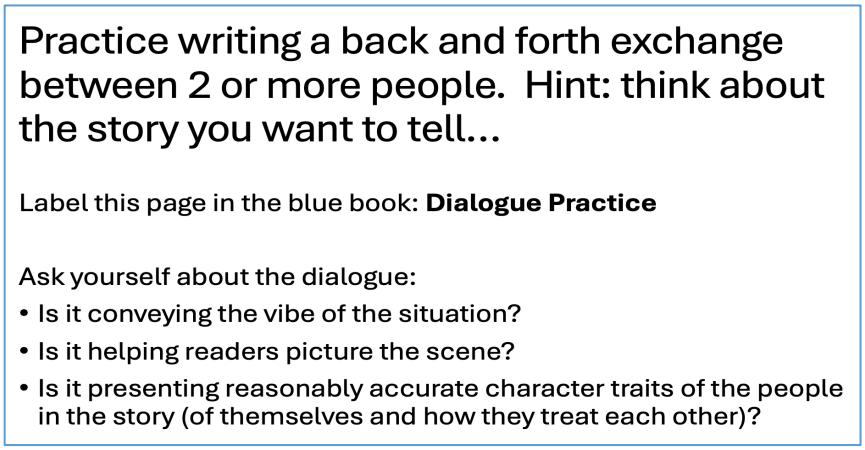
Figure 5.8 Slide Explaining the Dialogue Game



End:

Have students practice by writing a conversation between at least 2 people until the last 20 minutes of class (see Figure 5.9).

Figure 5.9 *Slide for Individual Dialogue Practice*



Appendix C - Lesson 3

Show Don't Tell

The third lesson in the series introduces students to the concept of show don't tell, including using active verbs, vivid descriptions, and consistent close first-person POV.

Time: 86 minutes

Kansas Literacy Standards:

W. 11-12.3d – Use precise words and phrases, telling details and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.
RL. 11-12.3 – Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story.
RL. 11-12.5 – analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text […] and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

Objectives:

- Read a complex text
- Begin to understand show don't tell and active verbs.
- Begin to understand the role and concept of active verbs.
- Learn first-person POVs.
- Students will begin drafting the story of a moment from their lives.

Beginning: Introduce show don't tell (using descriptive language instead of summary language), using the following 2 examples:

1. Example of telling: Jenny tripped.
   Example of showing: The brittle, grey pavement came up to meet Jenny as her right foot clumsily stumbled over her left.

2. Example of telling: It was late fall.
   Example of showing: Brown and yellow leaves crunched beneath her feet.

Middle:

1. Ask students to keep that in mind we read Mark Twain's "Two Ways of Seeing a River." https://frenchdesi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/two-ways-of-seeing-a-river-by-mark-twain.pdf
2. After reading, ask students to comb through and identify strong descriptive phrases and share with the class.
3. Discuss To Be verbs (practice conjugating together), and the difference when TO BE verbs are left out. Write the To Be verbs on the board as you go, for their reference later in the lesson. Explain how, without To Be verbs, authors are compelled to use *active verbs* and much more vivid, descriptive language.
4. Share 2 more examples, and have them specifically focus on the To Be verbs:
    a. Telling: The dog was unusual.
    Showing: The dog's burnt orange fur seemed to spread in every direction as it crossed its grey, twitchy, eyes.

    b. Telling: The pizza was delicious.
    Showing: Covered in bubbly mozzarella and sizzling pepperoni sausage, the pizza's beaconing sent of buttery herbs on top of savory garlic and earthy, freshly baked, crust called to me. I reverently brought a slice to my mouth. As the flavors overwhelmed my tongue, my eyes closed involuntarily. As if by closing them I could bask in the flavor even longer.
5. Provide students with the following examples of telling. Have them choose 1 and change it to *showing*. Give them about 5-10 minutes and explain that you are expecting about a full page of practice writing. Play classical music as they write.
    a. It was a stormy night.
    b. The party was fun.
    c. The garden is pretty.
    d. I am smart.
    e. He/She is a good athlete.
    f. He/She is anxious.
    g. You are running late today.
6. Pass out highlighters and have them exchange their show don't tell drafts. When everyone has someone else's draft, have them comb through and highlight all of the TO BE verbs they can identify.
7. Have students return the drafts to the authors. Then, direct them to rewrite their drafts, this time using much more active verbs and descriptive language. Their goal with this exercise is to eliminate To Be verbs this time around. Give them about 10-12 minutes. Play classical music as they write.
8. Have them exchange their drafts with a classmate again. This time, direct them to highlight passages that work particularly well.

9. Once the drafts have been returned to the authors, ask for volunteers to share aloud some of the phrases that stood out.

End: Ask students to begin to brainstorm possible stories, moments from their lives that they would feel comfortable sharing AND that they would like to express creatively. Have them make a list in their composition books and explain that you will provide feedback on their ideas.

Appendix D - Lesson 4

Dialogue with Show Don't Tell

The fourth lesson in the series begins to combine concepts of show don't tell with characterization through dialogue.
Time: 86 minutes

Kansas Literacy Standard:
W. 11-12.3b – Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
RL. 11-12.3 – Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story.
RL. 11-12.5 – analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text […] and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

Objectives:

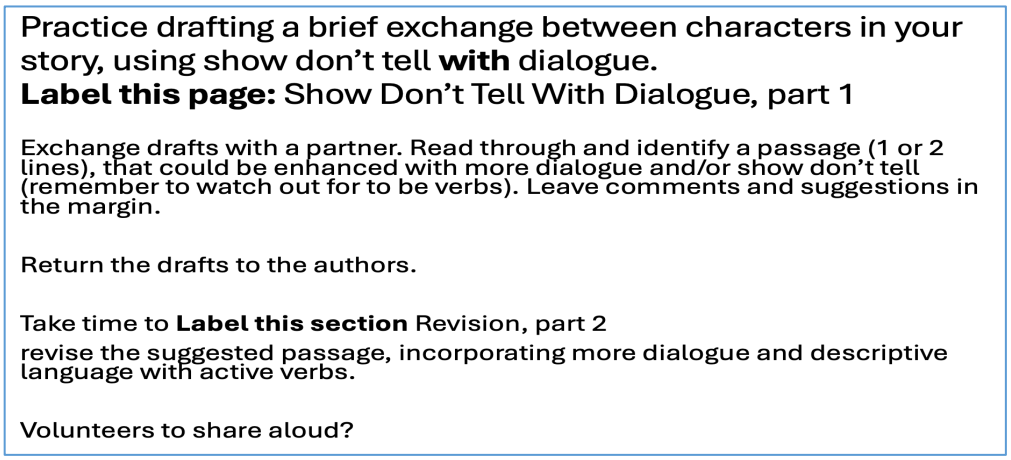
- Read and examine a complex text.
- Combine concepts of dynamic characterization through dialogue with show don't tell.
- Collaborate with peers.

Beginning: Explain that dialogue and show don't tell, integrated together, make for the most dynamic of creative writing in both fiction and nonfiction stories. Together read the first 11 pages of Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time.* Then ask students to identify passages of show don't tell. After a few have been shared that stand out, ask them to describe the characters, based off of what they say aloud combined with the active verbs and descriptive language happening. Try to facilitate an engaging, analytical discussion.
https://online.fliphtml5.com/qlqrn/muju/#p=14

Middle:

1. Then, ask them to practice drafting a brief exchange between characters in a moment from their chosen story. Have them include concepts of show don't tell *with* dynamic dialogue. Play classical music and give them about 10 minutes to write.
2. Have them exchange drafts with a classmate and direct everyone to identify a passage (1 or 2 sentences), that they feel might be enhanced with more dialogue and show don't tell. Have them return the drafts to the authors (see Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.10 *Slide Explaining Collaborative Activity Practicing Show Don't Tell with Dialogue*



3. Ask students to focus on the passage identified by their classmates, and to slow it way down by zooming in and incorporating tons of show don't tell and more revealing dialogue between characters.

End: In their composition books, ask students to choose a story from their lives (it could be the same story they started on today), and make a bullet point list of the events that took place in the story. The list might include the details remembered, what people said (summary), weather, etc. Explain that we will use this list for what we will work on tomorrow. Collect composition books.

Appendix E - Lesson 5

Pacing

The purpose of the sixth lesson in the series is to make students aware of POV and word choice, how that contributes to the tone of writing, and to practice more descriptive language.

Time: 86 minutes

Kansas Literacy Standards:
W. 11-12.3b – Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
RL. 11-12.5 – analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text […] and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

Objectives:

- Examine complex texts for aesthetic impact, including contrasting tones.
- Learn and practice consistent close first-person POV.
- Practice descriptive language, incorporating intended tone.
- Analytically collaborate with peers.
- Further develop narrative stories.

Beginning: Go over first-person present tense and past tense POV (see Figure 5.11), then compare with an example of a close POV (see Figure 5.12).

Figure 5.11 *Slide Introducing First-Person POVs*

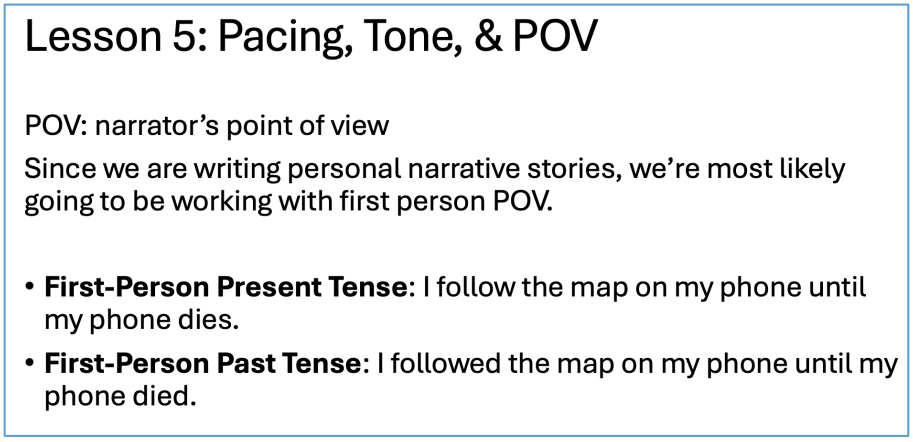
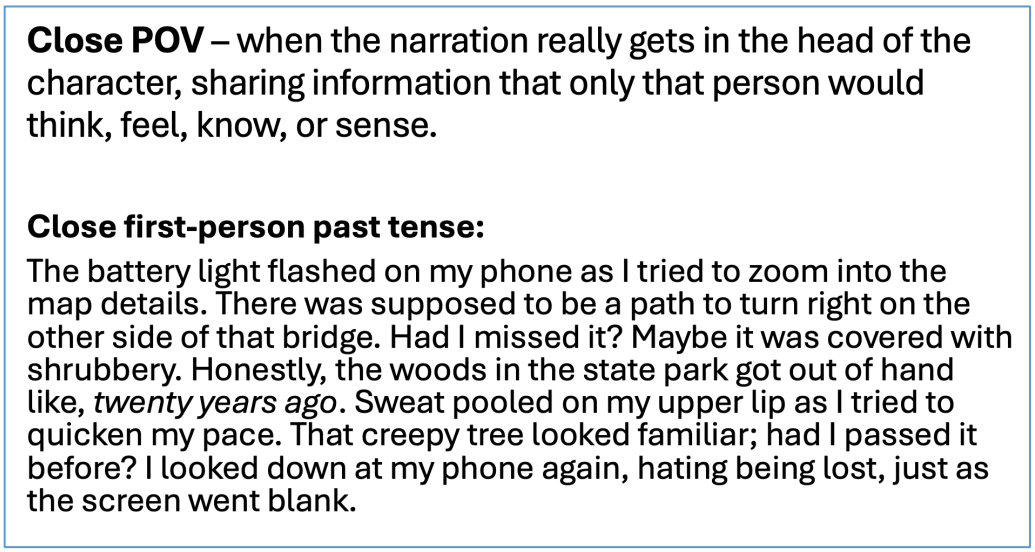


Figure 5.12 *Slide Demonstrating a Close POV*

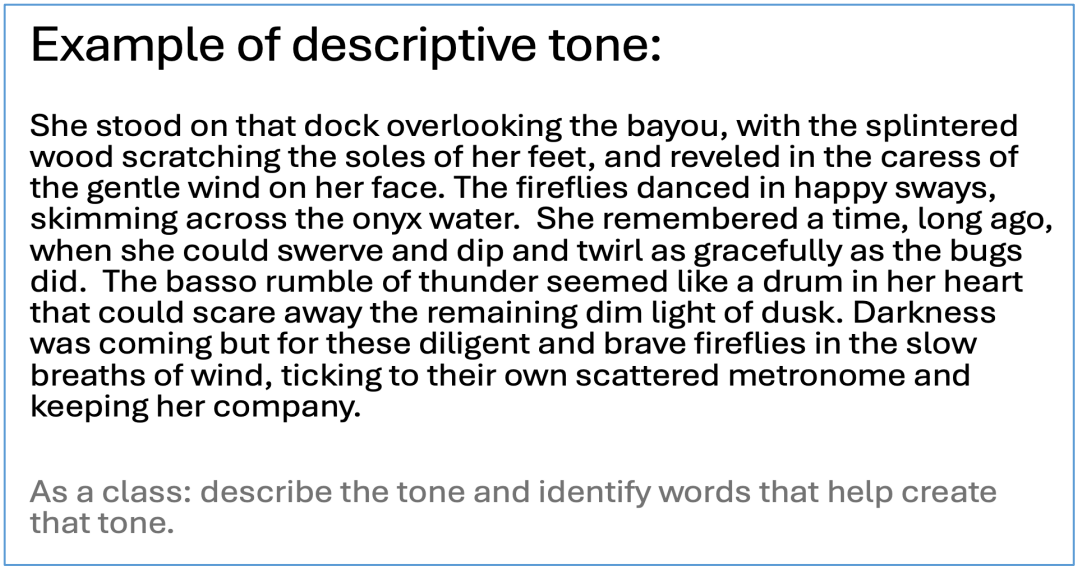


Explain that it doesn't matter which POV tense is used, as long as they stay consistent and try to make it as close as possible.

Middle:

1. As a class, read the first 2 paragraphs of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Pitt and the Pendulum." Have them comb through the text in small groups looking for descriptive words and phrases that set the tone of the piece.
2. As a class, read the first 2 pages of J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit. Again, have them tease out words and phrases that set the tone.
3. Show an example of your own writing that has more of a complex tone (see Figure 5.13). Have students identify the differing tones expressed in the writing. Then, explain that humans are very complex and the tone they set for their stories should reflect that.

Figure 5.13 *Slide Demonstrating Tone*



4. Have students make a list of descriptive words and phrases that will help set the tone for their stories. Have them use the thesauri available.

End: As a class, read excerpts from the first chapter of Cecelia Ahern's *The Time of Our Lives*. Then ask the class to explain what is being paced out in this chapter (an extremely brief moment of reading a 3-line note). Explain that authors bring attention to the most important parts of the story through pacing. Have them spend the remainder of the class practicing pacing out the most important moment of their chosen story, using the list they made for tone and aiming for a very close POV.

Appendix F - Lesson 6

Shaping a Story

The purpose of the seventh lesson in this experience is for students to solidify the stories from their lives they will tell.

Time: 86 minutes

Kansas Literacy Standards:
W. 11-12.3b – Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
SL 11-12.1c – Propel conversations that promote […] a divergent and creative perspective.

Objectives:

- Students will practice descriptive language.
- Students will flesh out the moments and details of the story they wish to share.
- Students will collaborate with their peers.
- Students will begin to draft or expand key moments of the stories.

Materials Needed: composition books and a tarp (for sitting on outside – optional)

Beginning: Weather permitting, go outside for class today. Make sure they bring their composition books and something to write with.

Middle:

1. As students to zoom into just 1 thing that they can sense (see, hear, smell, etc.), where they are sitting outside. Then have them practice writing a very detailed description of it. Remind them to use all that they have learned so far about show don't tell, active verbs, etc. Give them about 5 minutes. Call on students to share.
2. Then, have them turn to the list of events they made (last week), of the moments in the story they want to share. Ask them to choose 1 of those moments (that hasn't been drafted yet), and slow it down, practicing show don't tell with a lot of description and active verbs. Then ask them to go back over their drafts and ask themselves if it really conveys the desired tone they wanted to set for their stories. Have them underline sentences/words they want to go back to and maybe tinker with. Explain to them that this is what creative writers do: constantly tinker with their words until they convey just the right effect they want for readers. Explain that a major aspect of creative writing, that sets it apart from journaling, is that the writer is ever mindful of the audience.

3. Then explain how we often figure more out about what we want to write when we take the time to talk about it aloud. Put them into pairs and have them verbally tell each other their respective stories that they have been thinking about and beginning to draft. Have them practice respectful listening and to be an encouraging audience when it is their partner's turn to share. Go through at least 2 more rounds of partnerships sharing stories.
4. Have students return to the list of events in the story. Ask them what occurred to them as they told their stories that wasn't included on their lists? What details, people, moments did they realize they should include as they spoke? Have them add to their lists accordingly.
5. Give them until the last 10 minutes of class to begin drafting their stories in earnest.

End: Ask for volunteers to read aloud, if there is a particular passage they are pleased with that they wrote. Pack up and head back inside to allow for time to get to their next class.

Appendix G - Lesson 7

Shaping The Story

The purpose of the seventh lesson in this experience is for students to solidify the stories from their lives they will tell.

Time: 86 minutes

Kansas Literacy Standards:
W. 11-12.3b – Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
SL 11-12.1c – Propel conversations that promote […] a divergent and creative perspective.

Objectives:

- Students will practice descriptive language.
- Students will flesh out the moments and details of the story they wish to share.
- Students will collaborate with their peers.
- Students will begin to draft or expand key moments of the stories.

Materials Needed: composition books and a tarp (for sitting on outside – optional)

Beginning: Weather permitting, go outside for class today. Make sure they bring their composition books and something to write with.

Middle:

6. As students to zoom into just 1 thing that they can sense (see, hear, smell, etc.), where they are sitting outside. Then have them practice writing a very detailed description of it. Remind them to use all that they have learned so far about show don't tell, active verbs, etc. Give them about 5 minutes. Call on students to share.
7. Then, have them turn to the list of events they made (last week), of the moments in the story they want to share. Ask them to choose 1 of those moments (that hasn't been drafted yet), and slow it down, practicing show don't tell with a lot of description and active verbs. Then ask them to go back over their drafts and ask themselves if it really conveys the desired tone they wanted to set for their stories. Have them underline sentences/words they want to go back to and maybe tinker with. Explain to them that this is what creative writers do: constantly tinker with their words until they convey just the right effect they want for readers. Explain that a major aspect of creative writing, that sets it apart from journaling, is that the writer is ever mindful of the audience.

8. Then explain how we often figure more out about what we want to write when we take the time to talk about it aloud. Put them into pairs and have them verbally tell each other their respective stories that they have been thinking about and beginning to draft. Have them practice respectful listening and to be an encouraging audience when it is their partner's turn to share. Go through at least 2 more rounds of partnerships sharing stories.
9. Have students return to the list of events in the story. Ask them what occurred to them as they told their stories that wasn't included on their lists? What details, people, moments did they realize they should include as they spoke? Have them add to their lists accordingly.
10. Give them until the last 10 minutes of class to begin drafting their stories in earnest.

End: Ask for volunteers to read aloud, if there is a particular passage they are pleased with that they wrote. Pack up and head back inside to allow for time to get to their next class.

Appendix H - Lesson 8

Typing a First Draft

The purpose of the eighth lesson in the series is to give students space and time to type out their first draft, relying heavily on the exercises completed in their composition books and with one-on-one consultations with instructor.
Time: 86 minutes

Kansas Literacy Standards:
W. 11-12.3b – Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
SL 11-12.1c – Propel conversations that promote […] a divergent and creative perspective.

Objectives:

- Students will have a typed, working draft of their stories that will be turned in at the end of class.
- Students will have the opportunity for one-on-one guidance and real-time feedback from instructor.

Materials Needed: all students will need their laptops (provided by the school), and possibly chargers, their composition books.

Beginning: Explain that today will be time and space for them to type out their stories. Admonish them to employ all of the tenets of creative writing learned thus far (ask them to remind you what they are). Instruct them to rely on the exercises and the parts of the story they already have a handle on, found in their composition books. Also, explain that their stories will naturally develop and evolve as they type (that is great!), and that I will examine and compare their finished products with their writings in the composition books. Also, explain that they will turn in their drafts at the end of class and that I will be providing feedback that evening. Lastly, explain that I will be going around, looking over shoulders, and that I encourage them to consult with me if they ever feel stuck (or want approval), about their stories as they proceed. Play classical music as they type.

Middle: Students will type their stories (or at least have a good working draft by the end of class). Teacher goes around and keeps students on-task as needed. Try to find lines from their typing that are particularly good and point it out to them as you go.

End: Have students submit their writing electronically and show me their screen proof before leaving the class.
Note: it is very important to make time this evening to provide feedback on all drafts submitted.

Appendix I - Lesson 9

Conclusion & Story Sharing

The final lesson in the series will allow students to present their stories as well as their thoughts and perspective regarding the experience.

Time: 46 minutes

Kansas Literacy Standards:
SL 11-12.1 – Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL 11-12.1c – Propel conversations that promote […] a divergent and creative perspective.

Objectives:

- Allow students the opportunity to share their stories and listen to their classmates' stories.
- Allow students to communicate their thoughts and perspective on the experience of learning creative writing skills, applied to their personal experiences.

Beginning: Instructor tells a story from her personal life (try to make it humorous), then explain that this is all we are doing: sharing stories. It should help take any pressure off.

Middle: Have each student take turns sharing their stories, verbally (without reading them). For a larger class, if time does not permit, ask for volunteers but explain that we would love to hear everyone's story if we only had the time. Share stories until the last 15-20 minutes of class.

End:

1. Make a list on the board of the different lesson, exercises or experiences we had during this unit. Answers may include: show don't tell, pacing, POV, dialogue, descriptive writing, time to write, going outside, getting feedback, collaborating with peers, etc.
2. Pass out questionnaire (see Appendix K) and give students time to answer the questions. Also, before the experience is over, make sure to have organized and scheduled the exit interviews with the willing participants.

Appendix J - Creative Writing Experience Questionnaire

1. Describe which, if any, creative writing experience or lesson during this study resonated with you, and impacted your writing the most.

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Did you adjust or revise your writing of the story based on the feedback you received, either from peers or the instructor at any time during this experience? If so, please describe how so.

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. How likely are you to continue creative writing on your own?
   Please circle one:

Very unlikely	Unlikely	It's possible	Likely	Very Likely

4. Compared to the essay writing you have had to do in school previously to this experience, please rate your personal preference in terms of enjoyability, confidence, and personal satisfaction (or dissatisfaction), with the creative writing experience.
   Please **circle all that apply**:

Creative writing is not my thing at all.	I feel more confident writing essays but learning creative writing was interesting.	I want to learn other genres of creative writing, like fiction, poetry, and/or playwriting.	Learning creative writing was fun; I enjoyed it and am proud of the story I wrote.
Learning creative writing skills had no impact on me, positively or negatively.	I wish we did more creative writing in school.	I want more ways to be creative in the ELA classroom.	Learning creative writing skills increased my writing confidence overall.

5. Please share any other feedback or comments about what this experience meant, or did not mean, to you.

   _____

   _____

   _____

Appendix K - Interview Questions

1. Please describe for me what you got out of this experience, if anything, of learning creative writing.
2. Please describe your experience, writing about, and presenting one of your personal stories through creative nonfiction writing.
3. Please describe your thoughts and feelings about working with your previous lived experiences through the medium of creative nonfiction writing?
4. Share your thoughts, in general, about learning creative writing vs. essay writing.
5. What meaning, if any, did you make of this experience?

Appendix L - Letters of Consent and Assent

Letter of Consent:

Miriam Barton, a PhD candidate at Kansas State University and the current College English instructor for HutchCC (for dual enrolled seniors at your school), is conducting a study at your school for all of the high school juniors. She does hold a current teaching license for the state of Kansas. The study will last 2 weeks and will take place during their regular English classes. It will be an experience in which she teaches your student creative writing skills, leading up to drafting their own creative nonfiction, personal narrative story. She will be collecting writing samples, asking students to fill out a questionnaire, and interviewing willing participants at the conclusion of the study (interviews will be recorded). The writing activities will not be optional but their inclusion in the study is optional. Choosing to not have their writing (or not be interviewed/answer the questionnaire), will not affect their grade in any way. Even after consent and assent are in place, participants can withdraw their consent/assent at any time without penalty; choosing not to participate will not affect their grade or standing in the course. Identifiers will be removed from the identifiable private information, and, after such removal, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent.

Students will be encouraged to write about happy events in their lives. That said, if a student chooses to write about a sad or traumatic event, there is a chance they might experience negative emotions during the writing process. They will be welcome to visit with the school counselor at any time of emotional struggle. They will be asked to write only what they are comfortable sharing.

The purpose of this study is to observe the benefits, if any, of secondary students learning nonfiction creative writing skills. After the study is complete, there is a chance that she will wish to include either the writing and/or the verbal communications she will have with your student in her doctoral dissertation and/or other academic pursuits. The names of the school and the students will be changed to protect their anonymity. For questions or concerns, please email her at mbarton@ksu.edu or contact either the supervisor of the study, Dr. Vicki Sherbert 785-210-6349 or the K-State IRB chair, Dr. Lisa Rubin, rubin@ksu.edu.

Questionnaire will include the questions:

6. Describe which, if any, creative writing experience or lesson during this study resonated with you, and impacted your writing the most.
7. Did you adjust or revise your writing of the story based on the feedback you received, either from peers or the instructor at any time during this experience? If so, please describe how so.
8. How likely are you to continue creative writing on your own?
9. Compared to the essay writing you have had to do in school previously to this experience, please rate your personal preference in terms of enjoyability, confidence, and personal satisfaction (or dissatisfaction), with the creative writing experience.

10. Please share any other feedback or comments about what this experience meant, or did not mean, to you.

Interview Questions will include:

6. Please describe for me what you got out of this experience, if anything, of learning creative writing.
7. Please describe your experience, writing about, and presenting one of your personal stories through creative nonfiction writing.
8. Please describe your thoughts and feelings about working with your previous lived experiences through the medium of creative nonfiction writing?
9. What meaning, if any, did you make of this experience?

____ I consent to my child being interviewed and their writing being included in the study.
____ I would like a copy of the dissertation/study once it is published. My email address is: _____

_____ _____

(Name of Student) (Signature of Parent or Guardian)

Letter of Assent:

Miriam Barton, a PhD candidate at Kansas State University and the current College English instructor for HutchCC (for dual enrolled seniors at your school), is conducting a study at your school for all of the high school juniors. She does hold a current teaching license for the state of Kansas. The study will last 2 weeks and will take place during their regular English classes. It will be an experience in which she teaches your student creative writing skills, leading up to drafting their own creative nonfiction, personal narrative story. She will be collecting writing samples, asking students to fill out a questionnaire, and interviewing willing participants at the conclusion of the study (interviews will be recorded). The writing activities will not be optional but their inclusion in the study is optional. Choosing to not have their writing (or not be interviewed/answer the questionnaire), will not affect their grade in any way. Even after consent and assent are in place, participants can withdraw their consent/assent at any time without penalty; choosing not to participate will not affect their grade or standing in the course. Identifiers will be removed from the identifiable private information, and, after such removal, the information could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent.
If you choose to write about events that are sad or otherwise traumatic to you, you are welcome to visit with the school counselor at any time of emotional struggle. You will be asked to write only what you are comfortable sharing and comfortable with other people reading.

The purpose of this study is to observe the benefits, if any, of secondary students learning nonfiction creative writing skills. After the study is complete, there is a chance that she will wish to include either the writing and/or the verbal communications she will have with you in her doctoral dissertation and/or other academic pursuits. The names of the school and the students will be changed to protect your anonymity. For questions or concerns, please email her at mbarton@ksu.edu or contact either the supervisor of the study, Dr. Vicki Sherbert 785-210-6349 or the K-State IRB chair, Dr. Lisa Rubin, rubin@ksu.edu.
Questionnaire will include the questions:

1. Describe which, if any, creative writing experience or lesson during this study resonated with you, and impacted your writing the most.
2. Did you adjust or revise your writing of the story based on the feedback you received, either from peers or the instructor at any time during this experience? If so, please describe how so.
3. How likely are you to continue creative writing on your own?
4. Compared to the essay writing you have had to do in school previously to this experience, please rate your personal preference in terms of enjoyability, confidence, and personal satisfaction (or dissatisfaction), with the creative writing experience.
5. Please share any other feedback or comments about what this experience meant, or did not mean, to you.

Interview Questions will include:

1. Please describe for me what you got out of this experience, if anything, of learning creative writing.
2. Please describe your experience, writing about, and presenting one of your personal stories through creative nonfiction writing.
3. Please describe your thoughts and feelings about working with your previous lived experiences through the medium of creative nonfiction writing?
4. What meaning, if any, did you make of this experience?

____ I assent to being interviewed and for my writing being included in the study.

____ I assent to my writing being included in the study but I don't want to be interviewed.

____ I want a copy of the dissertation/study once it is published. My email address is:

_____