

Foreword

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Creative Writing Across the Curriculum: Meaningful literacy for college writers across disciplines, languages, and identities

Justin Nicholes

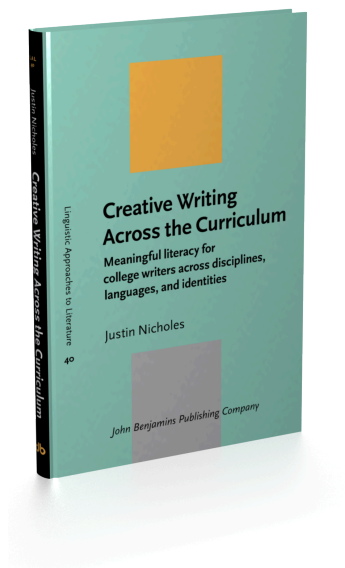
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Foreword

David I. Hanauer

As I read through this book, I could not help but think of my own mortality. What a strange thing to say at the beginning of a foreword. But it is honest and, at its heart, what meaningful literacy, a concept so central to this book, means. Literacy education has had a mixed history in terms of its ability to allow students to find themselves, understand life, and position themselves in their own narratives. Much of the history of literacy education is about oppression and forcing students to become accurate, correct, and conventional in the most limited sense of the word. Back to basics, a focus on vocational literacy, English only classrooms, literacy gate-keeping, and many other conservative, backward-looking pedagogical movements are primarily manifestations of the idea that literacy belongs to the nation and that teaching is about forcing students into performing a preconceived, externally validated form. But literacy and, in particular, creative literacies can have very different aims. They are about ownership, voice, emotion, and engagement. They are about finding oneself and understanding one's life. Creative literacies allow, even encourage, divergence in form and validate the performance of self. Creative writing ultimately strives to allow writers to find and create meaning for themselves and for their readers. Creative literacy in all its forms situates readers/writers in relation to their own lives and provides a basis from which they can see their own uniqueness against the backdrop of the multiple discourses trying so hard to define them.

This is a book about using creative literacies across the curriculum with students who may never have had the experience of actually doing creative writing. Before I address the how of this book, it is worth mentioning how radical this idea actually is. Usually, this field is limited to a subsection of English and is considered a specialization even within the teaching of writing in English departments. Now, it is true that, when a creative writing course is offered, the enrollment and the desire to take such a course are far higher than available space. It is also true that creative writing beyond academia on a wide range of social media and internet-based platforms is flourishing like never before. In other words, there is clear evidence that creative writing is popular as a self-motivated writing activity. Where the problem has been is in the perception within academia, even within Composition, of its

nature and role. Within these circles, the divide between fact and fiction is stringent, with fiction being relegated (or elevated) into a different, less serious, area of activity. The argument goes that, while creative writing is “fun”, the real work of a writing course is to teach the serious work of writing what is known, what is warranted, and what can be argued. The roots of Composition and Rhetoric are, as Plato argued, against the falsity of poets and their manipulation of the emotions. While the position I have presented is on the extreme end of what Compositionists actually enact in their classrooms, there is at the college level this deep-rooted distrust of all that is creative, literary writing.

But, of course, the core divide between fact and fiction is not as stringent as many would like us to believe. More importantly, the role of beauty, personal positioning, narrativity, connectivity, and emotion is not divorced from any written text. Are all scientific articles equal? Or, are some better written, more compelling, more enjoyable, more engaging than others? If the answer is “yes, there are differences,” then one should consider perhaps that some aspects of beauty, connectivity, or emotion have slipped into the writing of a scientific research article. Consider the fact that the field of technology has put these components at the core of its commercial success. Do most people buy a MacBook or a Surface PC because of its technical competence or because of its aesthetics, the quality of the interface, and the ability to “make it their own” through built-in customization? Today’s world of technology is based on science and applied aesthetics. It is this concept that underpins the usage of creative writing across the curriculum. I have coined the term “applied literariness” (Hanauer, 2018a) to capture this idea about how creative writing techniques can be employed beyond the confines of the creative writing course. Writing in many settings can benefit from the forms and interactions inherent in a creative writing approach. This book is the most advanced and daring version of this idea to date.

But I need to say something of the how of this book as that is as daring as the ideas themselves. If an argument is made for the role of creative writing in other areas, it is usually theoretical and couched in positive emotions. That is not the mode of this book. Here, it is empirical data and meta-analysis which direct the statements made. Justin Nicholes has done the hard work of tracking down, reviewing, synthesizing, and evaluating the different findings relevant to the discussion of whether creative writing can be used across the curriculum, what this implies, how it can be assessed, and the values that this entails. The argument here is not theoretical but empirical and based on multiple, rather than single studies.

For some, the combination of creative writing and empirical research is an oxymoron and perhaps an impossibility. They are strange bedfellows, but Nicholes was trained in a tradition of empirical studies of literature and has utilized this

background to the utmost in the current mature discussion of the data relevant to the issue at hand. I will leave it to the reader to decide about the values of this approach. But the data is compelling and fully presented. Ironically, those who argue for the importance of warranted arguments in their own Composition curriculums and against creative writing often do not have the quality or amount of evidence presented here to support the positions that are ultimately taken in this book.

In ending, I would like to return to where I started: my own mortality. This book is meaningful to me as it continues, extends, and moves beyond the work I have done in my career. There is no greater joy for an academic than to see one's work move to the next level with the new generation of researchers. Throughout my career both as a literacy teacher and a researcher, I have tried to promote the idea that literacy can and should be meaningful to every student and every writer. I believe that through literacy, writers should find themselves and understand the world around them; that literacy should be a means of connection between one's consciousness, experience and society; and that writers should be trained to reflect and engage with the things they have been told about themselves, their profession, their families, their societies, and the world. Literacy is where one finds oneself and makes life's meanings.

This book has the potential to bring this practice of meaningful literacy instruction to many students across a wide variety of disciplines and contexts. I highly encourage any compositionist, literacy instructor, and writing researchers to read this book as a state-of-the-art position on what we know about using creative writing across the curriculum. As argued, exemplified, and supported in this volume, creative writing has the potential to revitalize writing instruction in many disciplines and fulfill functions that go beyond the usually curricular concerns of college composition. This book is an opening and an invitation to utilize college writing in new ways to the benefit of all involved: students, instructors, programs, and institutions. I encourage the reader to see how it can be implemented. I have no doubt the reader's work will benefit from this interaction.

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