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INNOVATIVE COURSE DEVELOPMENT GRANT

Awarded Spring, 2009

Creative Writing in the Classroom: The CSUSB-SBUSD Collaborative Project for the Teaching of Creative Writing in the Secondary Schools

PROJECT GOAL: In this project, I sought to reinvigorate the long-dormant English 511: Teaching Creative Writing in the Secondary Classroom course by creating a collaborative project between CSUSB and the San Bernardino Unified High School District. Under this program, upper division and graduate students in English and Creative Writing at CSUSB would spend the first part of the quarter undergoing intensive training, and then employ that training in the second half of the quarter by running creative writing workshops for local high school students. The project had multiple goals for a variety of constituencies. The primary goals included:

1. For CSUSB students, it would provide a rare, hands-on opportunity not just to shadow-teach or observe but to assume responsibility for their own group of high school students, thereby gaining both experience and insight into their own talents and challenges as future teachers.
2. For San Bernardino Unified high school students, the program sought to provide a rare outlet for serious creative work in a district dominated by crisis management and testing mandates. In addition, it would introduce many to the joys and very different nature of the university learning experience.
3. For the community as a whole, the project sought to foster and nurture new and lasting relationships and healthy exchanges of ideas between the university and the surrounding community.
4. For the teaching of creative writing, the project provides a means to help me expand upon and spread the word about methodologies and a philosophy of teaching creative writing that I developed during my 15 years teaching high school creative writing and English, and to awaken current and future educators to the enormous benefits—for the development of *all* student writers—of this process.

WHEN IMPLEMENTED: Spring, 2009, and then again in Spring, 2010

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT (AS DESCRIBED IN ORIGINAL PROPOSAL): As noted above, in my new 511 model, CSUSB students would spend the first half of the quarter training to run a six week workshop with a select group of high school students from the San Bernardino Unified School District during the second half of the quarter. My work would involve not just **devising the completely new curriculum** for the training portion of the class, but **supervising and providing constant feedback for and revision to the workshop** our students conduct for the high school students. The work in the course would become much more **deeply self-reflective and project-driven**, and would culminate in a public reading in which the high school students present the stories and poems they have created under the supervision of CSUSB's student-teachers.

Central to this new curriculum would be several principles I believe absolutely essential to the development and nurturing of creativity in teenagers, including:

1. Rather than being clever and flashy, assignments must be essentially simple, targeted at specific skills but also fundamentally *responsive to and driven by the students' own predilections and nascent ideas*. **Training new teachers to develop and administer these sorts of assignments involved rethinking not just the relationship between teacher and student but also the resourcefulness and breadth of knowledge necessary to instruct a diverse classroom full of young writers.**
2. Most of what passes for workshop discussion of student work (at all levels, but particularly in high school) is at once overly dogmatic and, paradoxically, rarely grounded in a shared perspective on the building blocks of effective imaginative writing. Therefore, **my curriculum would engage CSUSB students and then, through them, SBUSD students in a dialog that would create a shared vocabulary and set of assumptions** designed not to steer young writers through any one set of techniques or school of writing but instead toward a set of flexible but deeply understood and agreed-upon criteria for use in evaluating and discussing one another's work.
3. Writing is an essentially communicative art, and therefore, **a productive workshop must interact with the community at large**. Therefore, both the in-class work I do with my 511 students and the workshop our 511 students run with CSUSB's young writers would feature visits from a variety of writers representing a wide range of genres and styles, and the entire experience would culminate in a public reading in which the high school students present their work to a public audience.

HOW THE PROJECT WAS IMPLEMENTED: Even before I was awarded the grant, I initiated a series of meetings with officials first from the San Bernardino Unified School District and then with the Principal, English Department Chair, and English department as a whole at Cajon High, where we eventually agreed the pilot program would be implemented. Initially, I had conceived of the project as running district-wide, but the logistics of that, at least in the first year, proved overwhelming. In addition, everyone agreed that we needed a year or two of proven success on a smaller level before committing resources city-wide.

I then devoted all the time the grant provided me—and more—to devising a curriculum that would train my CSUSB students sufficiently not just in the theoretical underpinnings of my program but in the specific challenges (and joys) of teaching this sort of material to adolescents. Even more than I expected, the challenge of providing CSUSB students with enough of a foundation, and also instilling in them enough confidence not just to teach but to start to develop their own teaching styles and ideas, proved especially daunting. Nevertheless, we forged ahead, had a dynamic and thrilling first four weeks in the spring of 2009, and headed off to Cajon to teach.

One fascinating challenge proved to be that we had no idea, until we arrived at Cajon, how many high school students would actually be involved in the program. Initially, I had conceived of the Cajon writing workshop as a single class period, attended by perhaps 15-20 interested high school kids, so that each of

the CSUSB students would have at least one opportunity to lead a full class period and then direct workshops. Interest at Cajon, though, proved overwhelming, and we wound up with as many as 50 students (depending on testing, other class restrictions, activities, etc.) joining us on any one day. Quickly, then, we came up with a new and, as it turned out, vastly more productive model, by which the high school students would be divided into individual “pods” of 4-6, each directed by two CSUSB students. This proved more effective than even I dreamed. The students and their student teachers formed powerful and lasting bonds, the CSUSB students wound up being responsible not just for a single class period but an entire half-quarter’s worth of instructional material, and the Cajon students received constant and detailed feedback on every new piece of writing.

There were many other obstacles, some anticipated (finding a mutually workable time at which to hold the workshop, overcoming any initial skepticism from Cajon teachers and self-doubt from CSUSB students, etc.) and some not (finding consistently designated and adequate classroom space at Cajon where the workshop could meet every time, for example). Adjustments to the plan proved not just constant but, interestingly, crucial to the experience, as they provided a window into the flexibility and imagination necessary for successful teaching at this (or, probably, any) level.

RESULTS OF THE PROJECT: Despite—or, indeed, because of the surprises on the route to implementation, the results of this project surpassed even my absurdly lofty expectations for it. The CSUSB students reported (in final papers, in SOTE’s, and through many other mechanisms) having incredibly powerful, even transformative experiences as they discovered their own talents as teachers while igniting the passions of their students. The Cajon students leapt into this activity with a joy and level of commitment that stunned even their most ardent faculty supporters at the high school. The Principal at Cajon, Toni Miller, was so impressed that she committed considerably more resources and space to the program for the 2010 edition. And the jubilant, celebratory climactic reading, held in the auditorium at the Feldheym Library in downtown San Bernardino, attracted nearly 150 parents, teachers, university personnel, and interested members of the general public, got written up enthusiastically in *The San Bernardino Sun* and other regional newspapers, and was filmed for local broadcast.

Somewhere along the way, the project also acquired its new and permanent name. It will forevermore be known as CREW (that’s Creative w(R)iting Experimental Workshop). The name, naturally, was devised by a student.

The Project had an even more successful second year at Cajon in 2010, and looks set to start spreading through the district in 2011.

And there are at least five Cajon veterans of the workshop now enrolled at CSUSB as creative writing majors.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS: The obstacles facing this program, particularly at a time of severe budget crisis, and with virtually all resources at the SBUSD directed toward surviving the next round of standardized testing, are considerable. But those obstacles just make the program's potential and benefits even more striking. Unsurprisingly, most of the student-teachers said that this class taught them more about teaching than any other experience they have ever had. Virtually every single Cajon student felt first liberated, then challenged, and finally inspired by the new workshop model at the core of CREW, which relies on—indeed demands—a full partnership between educators and students. And the district has reawakened to the evident and not at all ambiguous positives of the incorporation of substantive arts education into the curriculum.

Future plans are not just to sustain but to grow the project, to deepen the partnership between the university and the SBUSD, and to find new ways to encourage, honor, and build upon the growth of the high school students as writers and the CSUSB students as teachers.