



Creative Writing in the Community

A Guide

Terry Ann Thaxton



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Creative Writing in the Community

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TERRY ANN THAXTON

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*To all of my students—past, present, future
—and in memory of my mother and her legacy of service*

CONTENTS

Preface xi

Introduction 1

1 Storytelling is for Everyone 7

Why we tell stories 7

Community-based learning projects in creative writing 9

The first step 9

Structured reflection 11

Readings 12

“Landscape and Language,” Lorraine Ferra 12

“Becoming an Ocean: Teaching Poetry in Nursing Homes,” Silvi Alcivar 18

2 Leaving Campus 29

Service-learning (and CBL) as citizenship 29

Key elements of service-learning 29

The next steps 32

Structured reflection 34

Readings 35

“What is an Author Off-Campus? The Writer in the Community and the Corporate University,” Julia Spicher Kasdorf 35

“Birth of an American Scholar,” Heather Fiedler 43

3 Making a Plan 47

Envisioning your CBL project 47

Designing 10–12 weeks of session (lesson) plans 49

Preparing weekly lessons 50

Anticipations, hopes, challenges 51

- Structured reflection 52
- Readings 53
- “The Lawtey Workshop,” Mark Powell 54
 - “Linking the Creative Writing Program with the Community,” Allen Gee 58
- 4 Taking the Leap 67
- Creative writing and life experiences 67
 - Apprehension, resistance, fear 67
 - Service-learning vs. volunteering 69
 - Service-learning history 69
 - Service-learning in other disciplines 69
 - Service-learning in various creative writing classes and programs 70
 - Community partner staff as co-educators 70
 - Structured reflection 71
 - Reading 72
 - “The Prayer Wheel,” David Hassler 73
- 5 Writing and Being 85
- Statistics and real life 85
 - Safety issues and boundaries 85
 - Writing and imagination 87
 - Checking in with self 88
 - Structured reflection 89
 - Readings 90
 - “A Red Wheelbarrow, a Hammock, and a Pomegranate: Why So Much *Does* Depend Upon Poetry,” Anita Skeen 90
- 6 Discovering the Pleasure of Poetry and Storytelling in the World 101
- Building confidence as a teaching artist 101
 - Observing your surroundings 101
 - The immersed writer 103
 - Connecting your project with your own life experiences 104
 - Structured reflection 105
 - Readings 106

- “*The Sublime, the Unsettling, and the Exuberant*’: Changing Students’ Attitudes Toward Aging through *TimeSlips* Creative Storytelling,” Robin Mello and Anne Basting 106
- “Teaching, or How to Fall in Love,” Robin Reagler 116
- 7 Creative Writing as Social Activism 123
- Art as resistance 123
 - Beyond your project 124
 - Structured reflection 126
 - Reading 127
 - “Activism in Academia: A Social Action Writing Program,” Frances Payne Adler 127
- 8 Doing Creative Writing 141
- Right to your life (and your voice) 141
 - Why *do* creative writing? 141
 - A very brief history of creative writing in the academy 142
 - Current issues in creative writing 143
 - Structured reflection 143
 - Reading 144
 - “The Assessment Wicket: How Can We Judge the Value of Writers Teaching in the Schools?,” Terry Hermsen 145
- 9 Changing Them, Changing You, Changing the World 165
- A deeper understanding 165
 - What you’re getting: Transferrable skills 167
 - What they’re getting 168
 - Structured reflection 168
 - Readings 169
 - “Citizens of Words: Service-Learning in Creative Writing Education,” Nathaniel V. Mohatt 170
 - “Keeping it Real: Creative Writing Under the Shadow of Standardized Testing,” Christopher McIlroy 177
- 10 Giving Community Members (a Loud) Voice 187
- Turning words into voices 187
 - Celebrating 188

- Publishing the work of participants 188
- Structured reflection 191
- Readings 191
 - “The Children We Leave Behind,” Lisa Chatterjee 192
 - “Writing Out of Grief,” Scott Parsons 195

- 11 Publishing Your CBL Project 203**
 - Publication at your university 203
 - Publication beyond the university 205
 - Outreach and the university 206
 - Structured reflection 208
 - Readings 209
 - “Poetry from the Inside Out,” Terry Blackhawk 209
 - “Who is the Self that Performs? Teaching and Learning Creative Identities and Creative Writing at a Youth Shelter,” Sharlene Gilman 216

- 12 The Value of Creative Writing in the World 225**
 - Civic responsibility 226
 - Imagine 227
 - Structured reflection 228
 - Readings 229
 - “Poetry-in-the-World: Where Service-Learning Goes Beyond the Classroom,” F. Daniel Rzicznek 229
 - “How Service-Learning Cultivates Empathy and Social Responsibility,” Carly Gates O’Neal 234

- Appendix A: Resources for students 241*
- Appendix B: Resources for teachers 273*
- Appendix C: Additional Resources for teachers and students 289*
- Notes and Sources 293*
- Index 309*

PREFACE

Creative Writing in the Community came about because when I first started sending my students into the community as teaching artists, I could find no guidebook for them. Without the help of my colleagues and a flashlight, I would not have found a way to make it work. I created a syllabus, which I pieced together using the fabulous resources from the National Campus Compact website. But I wanted my students to be part of a conversation with writers around the country who were involved in this kind of work. I wanted them to know the history of creative writers in the community. I wanted them to know how creative writing and community service could go hand-in-hand.

There are many great books about the work of teaching creative writing in the community, and there are many good books that provide writing teachers with ideas for lessons. The Teachers & Writers Collaborative and the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) have numerous resources for writers interested in this kind of work. And there are numerous books about the value of service.

This is a *guidebook*, an *anthology* (readings), and a *resource book* intended for creative writing students; however, writers outside the academy who wish to design their own community-based creative writing projects will find this book helpful as well. The guidebook provides weekly steps through a semester (or 10–14 weeks), from deciding where to conduct a creative writing workshop in the community, to preparing an overview of a semester-long project, to designing weekly lessons, to understanding the connections between creative writing in the academy and creative writing in the community. The readings include essays by writers who have been involved in this kind of work in various ways—some essays from former students, others from directors of nonprofit organizations, others from faculty members who have either integrated community-based learning (CBL) into their creative writing classes or designed courses solely for this purpose. The resources provide sample semester-long lesson plans, links to websites that provide lesson planning assistance, and links to websites of organizations that hire individual writers to do this work continuously.

I have always been involved with community service. As a child living in Florida, I rode with my mother from house to house, and then church to church to gather food and clothing for Cuban refugees throughout the 1960s. As a teenager, I designed my own service projects—taking food and

talking to “shut-ins,” organizing food drives at my high school, inviting and taking a young deaf boy to the Ringling Art Museum.

When I started teaching freshman composition in the mid-1990s at the University of Central Florida (UCF), I designed assignments that required experiential learning. Students selected a general diversity issue topic they would research for the entire semester. My “issues” list included poverty, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, and disability. Once students chose a general topic, they were required to “experience” something within that topic that they’d never experienced before. For example, if a student chose religion, and he/she had always been a Catholic, that student attended a Hindu Temple or an evangelical church. If the student selected poverty, that student might visit a shelter for the homeless or free health clinic. The student then used these new experiences to compare with library research.

Then, in 2003, I met Joann Gardner, a professor at Florida State University who’d founded Runaway With Words (RWW), a creative writing community program that worked with youth in shelters. She wanted to offer an RWW workshop here in Orlando. Joann trained me and six students I’d asked to work with me. After our training, my students and I went once a week to the PACE Center for Girls to run poetry workshops. At the end of our 12 week session, we held a reading for them on-site. The girls at the school wanted a “boy band,” and we recruited four young musicians from our university.

After that first semester-long workshop, my students suggested that I find a way to incorporate the type of work we did in creative writing workshops and classes.

Just about that time, Florida Campus Compact provided a grant to UCF to officially create a service-learning program. I began to require service-learning in my classes, sending students out into the community as writers of service. I then designed a course “Creative Writing in the Community,” and taught it for the first time in 2005. Since then I’ve continued to develop guides and manuals for my students, presenting my syllabi and experience at conferences and with individual teachers across the country. I found other professors who were doing similar projects: some with institutional support; others without it.

I hunted for resources on how to integrate the type of project we’d done through RWW into a creative writing class. Michael Steinberg (co-author with Robert Root of *Those Who Do, Can: Teachers Writing, Writers Teaching*, 1996) suggested I contact David Cooper, who’d founded the Service-Learning Writing Program at Michigan State University. Cooper is the winner of the 1999 national Thomas Ehrlich Faculty Award for Service-Learning, awarded by the Campus Compact and the American Association of Higher Education. I am eternally grateful to him for his openness—sharing his writing class syllabi with me and encouraging me to tweak it to fit creative writing. When I asked David if he knew of a guidebook for creative writing students and their teachers who want to engage in this kind

of work, he said he didn't know of any, and that perhaps I should write one.

Although I've never met or talked with Robert Coles, I would not have continued requiring service-learning in my courses without his books to push me forward. My copy of *The Call of Service* (1993) has a sticky note on every page.

I am grateful to all of my students—past, present, and future—who are most often excited about the possibilities, and to those students who sometimes resist the requirement of service-learning, yet trudge through—all of whom find the pleasure of giving others the opportunity to tell their stories.

Thank you to my first acquisitions editor at Bloomsbury, Colleen Coalter, for seeing the need for this book. Many thanks to all of the great editors at Bloomsbury, including Laura Murray and Mark Richardson. Special thanks to David Avital, Senior Commissioning Editor, for answering so many questions, and pushing the book forward. I am grateful to Dawn Booth for her good editing eyes, and to all the good people at Fakenham Prepress Solutions, especially Kim Storry.

My deepest admiration and gratitude to those teaching artists who allowed me to include their essays in this book. They persevered through several years from inception to production. Many thanks to everyone who expressed interest and excitement in a book like this: those who endlessly supported this process.

Eric Fershtman deserves more thanks than I can say for his editorial assistance and advice. I am grateful to all of the reviewers who gave their time and honest feedback, and whose suggestions made the final product better.

I owe a tremendous thank you to Don Stap who always believes in my projects and supports me through my days of doubt. I am grateful to my colleagues and writer friends who continuously encouraged me to get this book into the world.

I am deeply indebted to Amy Zeh, the Service-Learning Program Director at UCF, who is also my friend and colleague, whose support and encouragement have kept me moving forward when frustration or burn-out waited for me just around the corner. I would also like to thank Patrick Murphy, English Department Chair, for telling me in 2003 to keep the creative writing in the community projects going. Many thanks to the College of Arts & Humanities at the University of Central Florida for valuing service-learning and for providing me the time to write and work on this book.

Introduction

Creative writers have a long history of providing writing opportunities for people in their communities. During the 1960s and 1970s, Poets-in-the-Schools—an organization funded by the National Endowment for the Arts—paid poets and graduate students to teach in public schools on a weekly basis. Today, nonprofit organizations, colleges and universities, and individual writers around the country provide creative writing in community settings. Nonprofit organizations hire writers or enlist volunteer writers to provide free or low-cost creative writing workshops in public schools, community centers, assisted living facilities, shelters, prisons, etc. These organizations rely on external funding and/or volunteers. In colleges and universities, many writing teachers integrate community service into their course requirements.

Most of us initially think of “community service” as serving food at a soup kitchen or organizing a clothing drive. For writers, community service allows you to offer to your community what you already do well, what you feel passionate about: creative writing.

A degree in creative writing is not like a degree in accounting or business or nursing—there are no head-hunters looking for poets or fiction writers. The basic questions for writers often come down to why do I write? Why am I doing this? Who is going to read my story?

This is a book about expanding your own story by providing opportunities for others to tell theirs. The book is also a rich anthology, filled with essays from writers, students, and teachers who’ve been at this kind of work for a long time. And the book contains sample syllabi for teachers who wish to design courses that incorporate community work, as well as sample semester-long lesson plans for writers who lead creative writing workshops in the community. Community-based workshops are different from the types of workshops we usually run in academia. Community workshops focus on generating writing and helping participants revise as long as they

are willing, but we don't generally run public critique workshops like you're used to in your college creative writing workshops.

Some teachers of creative writing have experimented with different types of community-based learning projects, but all of them find some way to use creative writing for the betterment of the community and to enhance academic learning in their creative writing courses.

While each project/program differs, there are some commonalities: each program views creative writing as an art; each program understands the value of creative writing as a way to build community; and each program places you, the writer, in settings where you have a great deal to offer.

Terminology

What is service-learning? Service-learning is defined by the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 as a method “under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service.”¹

The Office of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Central Florida defines service-learning “as a teaching method that uses community involvement to apply theories or skills taught in a course. Service-learning furthers the learning objectives of the academic course, addresses community needs, and requires students to reflect on their activity in order to gain an appreciation for the relationship between civics and academics. In other words, service-learning combines civic engagement with curriculum—students serve and learn. Each faculty member decides how to incorporate service-learning into his or her own curriculum: service-learning may be a requirement or not; it may be a single project or an ongoing placement.”²

Generally, there are four to five components that make a particular project “service-learning” rather than volunteering (which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2):

- 1 Meets a real community need.
- 2 Integrates into and enhances the curriculum.
- 3 Coordinates with a community agency, another school, or the community at large.
- 4 Helps foster civic responsibility.
- 5 Provides structured time for reflection.³

In higher education, *service-learning* is sometimes referred to as *community-based learning* (CBL), *field work*, or *experiential learning*. Outside of the university, many of the nonprofit organizations and individual writers who direct community-based creative writing programs often refer to their committed service as a *Writing Residency*. I like the term “Writing

Residency” because it truly encompasses what a writer (whether a college student or professional writer) does for the *participants*. Writer-in-Residence suggests that you are entering into an agreement with a specific group of people for a specific amount of time, to lead them into their literary imaginations. However, in order to include all of the possible types of projects you might do as a writer in the community, I will forthwith refer to your work as your CBL project.

Throughout this book, you may encounter these different terms to refer to this same work. While there are distinctions between these terms—community-based learning, service-learning, field work, experiential learning—they all focus on taking the writer away from his/her writing desk and into the community, using the tools of craft in order to enhance the lives of others.

Community-based learning in creative writing classes can take many forms. I have a colleague who created a CBL project to gather oral histories from people in various groups, which they edited and gave to the local historical society. Another colleague takes her fiction writing students into different classrooms and has school children perform scenes from the stories the college students have written. In this way, the school children become active in literature, and the college students can see where their scenes lack detail and specificity.

For the purposes of a college classroom, a writing residency does not merely provide community agencies with student volunteers. The key for college teachers is to link the service directly to classroom learning. Some teachers have created new courses that focus exclusively on the writing residency, and others have integrated a writing residency into a workshop course.

In whatever way you’re coming into a writing residency project, this book is about making your own writing residency a successful one. Once you’ve decided to conduct a writing residency, you must find a *community partner*. The community partner is the agency or school where you will work. More specifically, the community partner is your contact person at the *site* where you will conduct your writing residency. Your community partner may be the principal at a school, or a specific teacher. Your community partner might be the program director at a homeless shelter. The community partner may or may not be on site with you, but is your contact person(s) for the duration of your residency as you work with *participants* (the children, youth, or adults in your community workshop).

The book as a guide

The book has 12 chapters, coinciding more or less with the length of a typical college semester. Chapter by chapter, the book guides you through a semester-long writing residency (CBL project). The book is arranged with

enough flexibility so that each teacher can use the book in ways appropriate to his/her own course design. Each chapter begins with a discussion of a topic appropriate for each week of the semester as you prepare and work through your CBL project. Chapters 1 and 2 focus on background information and getting things set up; Chapter 3 focuses on developing the overview of your residency; Chapters 4 and 5 focus on planning each site visit and coming to understand the people you work with; Chapters 6–9 delve into the purpose of this kind of work as well as guiding you through some of your possible reactions to working outside the classroom; Chapter 10–11 focus on preparing for publication and/or presentation of the work of your participants and your own work; Chapter 12 deals with concluding your residency and deciding what you might do next.

After the discussion and what-to-do sections are several *structured reflection* prompts: a vital component of service-learning. Structured reflection challenges us beyond superficial observations and assumptions. Structured reflection can lead to material for an article or a book, but, most importantly, it allows you, as a writer, to deeply reflect on the weekly work (satisfactions and challenges) of your CBL project. Community-based learning allows you to grow in three significant areas: personally, academically, and as a citizen of a democracy. The structured reflection prompts are designed to help you identify your growth in these areas.

More than simply a journal, structured reflection is best utilized if you design for yourself a question that you will seek to answer during the course of your residency. You might, for example, want to discover why people are interested in storytelling, or why there are children without books at home, or why creative writing matters in the first place. Your teacher might create additional prompts for you to respond to each week. At the beginning of a service project, we often feel idealistic. Robert Coles refers to this as “young idealism” (Coles, 1993, pp. 174–207). Later we might feel hopeless about poverty or homelessness. Later we might feel useful and more realistic about social issues, the value of writing, or what can actually be accomplished in twelve to fourteen weeks.

Finally, each chapter includes one or two essays by teaching artists, writers who have conducted writing residencies, and many who teach others to lead writing residencies. Robin Reagler (Executive Director of Writers in the Schools, Houston) and Terry Blackhawk (Founding Director of InsideOut, Detroit) each have an essay in the book about their work as directors of nonprofit organizations and their work as teaching artists. Lorraine Ferra, Silvi Alcivar, and Christopher McIlroy offer essays from the perspective of teaching artists who support themselves, either through grants or holding down other jobs while conducting residencies in their communities. Other writers direct literary arts outreach programs from within a university or college setting. Essays by David Hassler (Kent State University), Julia Kasdorf (Pennsylvania State University), Anita Skeen (Michigan State University), Terry Hermsen (Otterbein University), Allen

Gee (Georgia State College and University), Anne Basting and Robin Mello (University of Wisconsin), Mark Powell (Stetson University), and Frances Payne Adler (California State University) provide essays about these types of programs. Other essays include those by writers who served in these university programs when they were students, essays by school teachers who incorporate service-learning into their classroom or have writers work with their students. Heather Fiedler, Lisa Chatterjee, F. Daniel Rzicznek, Sharlene Gilman, Carly Gates, and Scott Parsons, and Nathaniel Mohatt address the impact this type of work on them personally, professionally, and on the community.

Beginning a writing residency is both exciting and daunting, especially if you've never done anything like this before, but I promise that it will affect your academic life, your personal life, and your sense of what it means to be a member of a community.

Many children, youth, and adults have no idea of the power of language until they encounter it in the way you can show them. Many do not know they have the capability to be creative, let alone write anything that anyone would want to read. Many do not know how to access their imaginations. They've never read poetry, or perhaps they've read poetry only for a school assignment, and have not experienced reading or writing as a pleasurable experience. There are adults in homeless shelters who want to tell their stories, but do not have paper or pencil or any idea how to begin. There are children in schools who have seen books only in their school libraries, who do not have books at home.

Creative writing students are often prodded by friends and family to explain how a degree in creative writing will prepare them for the "real world." Each semester numerous students change their majors from business or biology or even literature studies to creative writing. MFA programs across the country are full to the brim. What you already know is that creative writing—learning to hone the elements of craft—enlivens language, and draws readers into your understanding of the human experience. Writers are the ideal leaders for community-based creative writing workshops. Writers who are engaged in community activism—leading creative writing workshops for often-times marginalized community members—are reminded over and over again of the thrill of writing well.

You already know that your voice matters. You know the value of telling stories. You know the value of language and communication.

We need to experience the world in order to learn about it. Writers are in the world and, in order to do our job well, we need to know the world. What better way to learn about the world than to use our talent and knowledge to allow others to experience the profound excitement in words, in writing their own stories, their own essays, their own poems?

CHAPTER ONE

Storytelling is for Everyone

Why we tell stories

Whatever your reason for taking a creative writing course or your interest in creative writing in the community, you must be at least curious about why, in spite of knowing that you probably won't make millions of dollars for your writing, you still *want* to write. Imagine the people in your community with that same desire to tell stories, but with no understanding of how to begin, or no computer, or no pencil or paper. Imagine those who've never been encouraged to tell their stories. Imagine those who do not have the opportunity to write.

In his essay, "I Am Writing Blindly," Roger Rosenblatt, talks about how the "last occupants of the Warsaw Ghetto ... took scraps of paper on which they wrote poems, thoughts, fragments of lives, rolled them into tight scrolls, and slipped them into the crevices of the ghetto walls." We want to tell our stories even if no one is there to listen. "We exist by storytelling" (2000, p. 142).

Why do we, upon seeing an acquaintance, or perhaps even a stranger, tell them what happened to us last week, yesterday, in our childhood? Why do we jot things down on napkins in restaurants? Why do we use technology to talk to friends several times a day? We write for many different reasons. We write to tell our stories.

Now, imagine the five year old who bounces into pre-kindergarten for the first day, and when her teacher asks her name, all she can do is shrug her shoulders and grunt. Or imagine a 70 year old man with Alzheimer's who's lost most of his memories, but when he sees a pot of chrysanthemums rises from his seat and dances. What is his story? Is there a way to help this five year old girl and this 70 year old man tell their stories?

Yes, there is. You possess skills that these folks don't have. What better way to learn the value of creative writing than to show a little girl or an

elderly man (or a kid in foster care, or a family in a shelter for the homeless) how to use description or character development to tell the stories locked inside their imaginations?

Community-based learning (CBL) asks those with knowledge and skills to take their knowledge and those skills into their community. CBL, service-learning, field work, immersion, a writing residency, whatever you want to call it, simply asks that you use the elements of the craft of creative writing to the betterment of your community. Creative writing matters because using personal experience connects us.

William Wordsworth argued, in the “Preface to Lyrical Ballads,” that the subjects of poetry should be chosen from ‘incidents and situations from common life’ (1965, p. 446) Wordsworth argued as well that the language should not be so formal as to exclude those who did not communicate in high English, but to use “Language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect.” He explains that in his poems, unlike those of his predecessors,

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men has been adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions (Wordsworth, 1965, pp. 446–7).

Wordsworth valued the “simple and unelaborated expressions” not because he thought of them as “less than” or because they didn’t have interesting stories, but because they were genuinely alive, living without the “social vanity” of the period, and without pretense. Authentic lives. Authentic voices.

Providing community members the opportunity to write creatively, to find their voices in their stories and poems, using words from their daily lives will bring you great satisfaction. There will be challenges along the

way, but the satisfactions of watching a child in a shelter for the homeless describe in images what her life is will far outweigh the challenges.

Community-based learning projects in creative writing

Most CBL projects in creative writing are writing residencies where you, the writer, commit to going once a week to a designated site, and lead creative writing activities. Many writing residencies follow the academic calendar simply because many programs work with school children, and working with children during the school day is ideal. For example, in my classes, a writing residency is a 10–12 week commitment (the length of the university semesters), depending upon each community partner's needs and schedule. Professional writers who contract with a school or district might offer a residency for the entire school year. Others might contract with a shelter for the homeless for one calendar year.

The first step

The first step in creating a CBL project is to decide where you want to work, using your talent and knowledge. Heather Fiedler, a student in the very first service-learning course I taught, wanted to work at a shelter for the homeless with adults. Other students wanted to work with children at the shelter. Our university has had a long-standing relationship with the local shelter, so I spoke with the program coordinator immediately, and she was thrilled. Heather, and four other students in class, spent every Wednesday evening with a group of adults. Two weeks into the semester, when I asked them to reflect on why they chose the community partner site they had, I discovered that Heather had asked to work with homeless adults because her mother had been living homeless for most of Heather's life. Heather wanted to understand what her mother's life might be like. Other students who worked with Heather had different reasons for working there. Every reason, or even not really knowing why, was and is valid.

Students have decided to work at an assisted living facility either because they never knew their grandparents, they wanted to understand more about memory-loss, they felt uncomfortable around children, or this was the only site that fit their schedule.

I have spent a significant amount of time (years) cultivating relationships with a variety of organizations and schools. Additionally, because our university supports an Office of Experiential Learning, it is likely that

students in my classes will have access to almost any type of organization, and be able to conduct their service-learning wherever they want to gain experience.

It might be that your teacher or the director or coordinator of the writing residency project you're involved in has done the initial planning. Perhaps you've been given a list of community partner sites from which you can choose where to conduct your residency. Perhaps you're starting from scratch.

Sometimes all students in a given class work with a specific community partner. This allows a small group of students to see the impact of four months of service at a specific site. Your teacher may have already committed you to a particular site. Or your teacher might have a list of possible sites that he has already contacted to make sure the clients at each organization have time and would benefit from creative writing. Or your teacher might ask you to find your own community partner. Whatever the case, there are many factors that play a role in your decision about where you will work.

- 1 Teacher's or organization's requirements: has a teacher or organization selected a site for you?
- 2 Schedule: will you be able to get to the community site each week at the designated time?
- 3 Location: can you reasonably and safely find and get to the site?
- 4 Emotional limitations: will you be emotionally able to see people week after week in this setting? One student writer wanted to work with children and youth, but knew that she could not work with homeless children. This, she said, would break her heart. Instead, she worked at a residential drug treatment facility for youth where she knew she could make a difference, and not feel hopeless from the beginning.

We will discuss the emotional process of this kind of work throughout this book, but at this point it's good to consider the challenges that might come from working with people in poverty, homeless children, angry teenagers, or lonely and dying elderly, and will bring you face-to-face with tragedies and social injustice.

You might feel overwhelmed, exhausted, frustrated, or upset. These emotions are common, and come with the territory of community service work of any kind. But if your work brings up emotional issues that require professional guidance, do let your teacher know. Remember, however, that your creative writing teacher is not a psychologist or therapist, and may refer you to a professional. At our university, students are able to see professional therapists free of charge.

Structured reflection

In the introduction, I mentioned structured reflection as a way to get beyond superficial observations and assumptions. Structured reflection can lead to material for an article or a book, but, most importantly, it allows you, as a writer, to deeply reflect on the weekly work (satisfactions and challenges) of your CBL project. The following set of questions is intended to get you thinking about where you will work and to examine your own approach, your own sense of community as you begin. I've separated the prompts based on its growth focus: your personal growth, academic growth, and/or growth as a citizen (a member of the community).

Personal

- 1 What are you most looking forward to during your semester of CBL?

Academic

- 2 Describe your understanding of what you're supposed to do at your community partner's location.
- 3 Consider the first time you realized the thrill of writing. Maybe it was a poem, a story, an essay, or a note to someone. Who was present? What did you write? How did this realization impact you? What was its value? What if you'd never had the opportunity to recognize this interest/talent?
- 4 What do you think is the value of community service to you as a writer?

Civic

- 5 What is your definition of "activism," "idealism," "civic engagement," and "education"? Avoid giving the dictionary definition. Instead, write a paragraph or two about what each of these means to you.
- 6 Where are you planning to conduct your CBL project? Why are you going to this location? Why did you choose this location? Rather than respond by saying something like "because I had to choose something," or "I want to go with my friend," or "my teacher selected my site for me," do a self-inventory—even if you had to choose something, even if your friend is going to

this site. You could have chosen to work at a different school, a different type of population. So why did you choose this site over the other choices? What do you think you will learn about yourself? What might you learn by observing something outside of your normal circumstances? What might you learn about the importance of real-life experience to writing poetry, essays, or stories?

Readings

Lorraine Ferra

Lorraine Ferra has taught extensively since 1980 as a poet-in-the-school in Washington, Utah, Delaware, Massachusetts, and Vermont. She has also taught in natural history museums, science centers, youth-in-custody programs, and senior citizens' centers. She is the author of two chapbook collections of poems: *Eating Bread* (1994) and *What the Silence Might Say* (2012). Her book on writing, *A Crow Doesn't Need a Shadow: A Guide to Writing Poetry From Nature* (Ferra and Boardman, 1994) has been endorsed by the National Council of Teachers of English. She lives in Port Townsend, Washington.

Landscape and Language

When the poet Rainer Maria Rilke admitted to his sculptor friend Rodin that he had come to a standstill in his writing, the artist suggested that Rilke leave his desk, visit the zoo, and look at an animal for a long time. On an almost daily basis, Rilke acted on the advice. He singled out a panther and watched it closely until he could *see* it. The outcome was his memorable poem ("The Panther," 1981), which reverberates with the monotony of the panther's pacing back and forth behind the bars of its cage.

As a sculptor, Rodin understood the necessity of keeping the senses alert, an ability considered basic to the visual arts but often neglected in language. Encouraging students to produce grammatically flawless compositions and stories, we often end up reading work devoid of visual and tactile imagery, music, and that aura of silence, which can draw us further into the depths of an experience.

I have been looking at the beginnings of two pieces by fifth graders encouraged by their teachers to write a story about floods coming down from the Utah canyons into the neighborhoods of Salt Lake City. The following was written by a student whose teacher simply announced the "assignment."

One year there was a great flood in Salt Lake City. Stores were closed, and homes were destroyed by the rough water ...

Well-written grammatically, but echoing in tone the nightly reports of newscasters on local, Utah TV stations.

Several students in another class mentioned that they were going to join their parents to help with sandbagging. Their teacher asked them to describe their experiences. She encouraged them to pay attention to the motion of the floodwaters, listen to neighbors' remarks, notice their facial expressions, and other surrounding activities. One of the students began her story this way:

Would you like to meet the father of a flood, stacking sandbags with tears in his eyes? His son ran away in the spring ...

What a magnetic invitation to enter the story. The imaginative intelligence and emotional engagement in these lines could have been generated only by attention and sensitivity to detail. Moreover, the fact that the student was present, looking and listening, enabled her to internalize the event, a necessary component of transforming the writing process into more than a mere exercise.

As a poet in education, I have been passing along Rodin-like advice to students: "This evening sit outside and watch the sunset. What does it remind you of? What does it smell, or sound, or taste like? Write a poem about your ideas while you watch the sun walk down the hills." As a result, I receive poems describing the sun on the horizon "quiet as a pumpkin sitting in my backyard" or "slipping away like someone turning off a lamp in the late evening." One student, whose attention had been diverted by a rainbow, handed me this short poem:

What is a rainbow? Sometimes
I think it is a beautiful bracelet
that turns on a girl's wrist.
Rick Lee Robins

The beauty of his image lies not only in the product, but also in the process; the student did not simply follow the idea of writing about a subject, but rather gave himself over to the few brief moments of the rainbow's sudden appearance. He was looking in the purest sense, without the self-consciousness that sees the object or occurrence as homework, without that myopic vision which blurs the possibilities awaiting the peripheral vision of the imagination.

Beyond encouraging students to observe and write outside the classroom, I have been taking them on what I call "poetry field trips" to such places as meadows and canyons, migratory bird sanctuaries, forests, beaches,

wetlands, etc. The decision on a location could be connected to a current geography, science, or social studies unit, or, best, simply contingent and spontaneous. Regardless of the relationship to the curriculum, it is attention, perception, and the act of writing that are integral to the awakening of language.

Early one fall morning I arrived with a group of fifth graders at Utah's Bear River Bird Refuge, one of the country's largest sanctuaries on the Pacific Flyway. The sun was still low in the east as we began the 12-mile auto tour, and shadows began lengthening across the narrow road flanked by tall reeds. The students, having spent much of their travel time consulting various field guides and waging over who could spot the most species of birds, suddenly quieted in the wild beauty of the place.

In preparation for the experience, I had suggested that they practice looking and wondering the way Walt Whitman did when a child brought him a clump of grass. I recited parts of Whitman's poem "Song of Myself" (1959):

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands,
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than
he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff
woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt...

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the
vegetation...

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves. (Section 6)

Although most students readily agreed that the last image was "weird," they were, nevertheless, enchanted by its haunting sense of wonder and open-endedness. They liked the way Whitman initially confessed his helplessness in satisfying the child's curiosity, and then enumerated the various "answers."

I suggested that they should not be concerned with rhyme when writing their poems, explaining that trying to find a rhyming word often cuts off the flow of their ideas and feelings. The Whitman poem was a good example of a poem that doesn't rhyme, filled as it is with its playful exploration, while moving with the natural rhythm of the human voice. It was also an inspiring model for a new way of looking and imagining. As we drove deeper into the refuge, the boy who had been reciting the old children's song about "The pelican—his beak holds more than his belly can," pulled his notebook out of his backpack after watching a flock of the magnificent birds descending about a hundred yards away. He began his poem with:

“Pelicans resting like huge white clouds on the blue river.” I sensed we were on our way.

One girl, convinced that there were no birds more wonderful than the whistling swans, composed this gracefully tangled mixture of images:

WHISTLING SWANS

They float like leaves over the river,
like crowned kings, but different in ways—
their long necks resemble arches
that have been standing for thousands of years.

DeAnn Perkins

Besides capturing the majesty of swans in “crowned kings,” she unconsciously unfolds her thinking process, which becomes part of the poem’s movement as she pauses with “but different in ways—” and reveals the association of swans with arches. The association was real for her, since she had lived for several years near Arches National Park. The sight of swans had evoked her childhood world, which she transformed in her poem.

All the students were overwhelmed by the wide variety of birds, but one boy was particularly charmed by a snowy egret’s alternating displays of what seemed to him as both stately and comic posturing.

THE QUESTION MARK

The snowy egret flaps his wings once
or twice, to show his pride. But
when a noise comes near, he pokes
his head up out of the water
like a question mark.

James Fairbanks

It was unmistakable that observing the birds intensified the students’ pleasures in writing about them and wanting to share their poems as the day went on. Their poems were spontaneous celebrations of being in this landscape of birds, not written assignments based on looking up information with photos of birds.

Ultimately, what students discover through the experience of writing in the landscape of the natural world is an inner landscape: that realm of language in which they can wander about and conceptualize the world in its freshness and immediacy. Moreover, the accumulated experiences of observing and writing outside the classroom can encourage a habit of spontaneity among students. The next poem, in which the writer saved the breathtaking moments of watching a hawk devour its prey in her yard, is an example of this spontaneous writing:

THE HAWK IN MY YARD

The hawk comes in
 on silent wings
 and perches high atop
 the old bare-branched tree.
 His piercing beak pokes
 his dead prey
 and little sparrow feathers
 fall to the ground.
 He sits with his back to me
 and, with a wary eye,
 turns his head
 to watch
 over his shoulder,
 then shifts his feet
 and ruffles his feathers
 as the cold night air draws near.

Allison Prescott

The writer just happened to be outside when the hawk came in “on silent wings.” Her poem reads like a detailed account at the scene of a mysterious event, and her last line, “as the cold night air draws near,” leaves her reader or listener shivering with her in the darkening yard filled with the hawk’s presence. Also, this tactile ending of the poem points to the fact that once the practice of looking and seeing is encouraged, the other senses open naturally as we allow the daily events of our lives to penetrate the shell of routine.

With the same group of students I led another poetry field trip to a canyon just a few miles outside Salt Lake City. It was a weekday morning, and, as I had expected, we found ourselves alone on the canyon trail. Alone, that is, with aspens and pines, hawk’s beard, lupine, and perhaps a dozen other newly opened, wild flowering plants. Each student had access to booklets on the regional wildflowers and had already thumbed through the pages filled with color photos of variegated flowers accompanied by their “wild” names: Rose Pussy Toes, Goatsbeard, Prairie Rocket, Yellow Monkey Flower, Creeping Barberry ... The names were enough to excite their imaginative instincts.

Before going off on the search, we gathered together, and I recited a poem for them by Denise Levertov in which she speaks of tulips “becoming wings / ears of the wind / jackrabbits rolling their eyes ...” (1961, p. 53).

Rarely do I ask students to write without first sharing a poem or two from selections of classical or contemporary poetry. I’ve found that this practice results in the stimulation of ideas and exposure to the various ways language can be explored. I ask them to recall favorite lines and to tell why

they suppose the poet chose a particular word or phrase out of so many possibilities. This habit invokes a necessary attentiveness to language and, consequently, to more unpredictable writing.

The Levertov model was a good choice; its associations broadened the list of exotic names which the students had learned from the field guides. Its last stanza established the perfect mood: "... some petals fall / with that sound one / listens for" (Levertov, 1961, p. 53).

These last words drifted off in the cool mountain air, and so did the children, quietly, as if listening for the flowers. One student returned, after sitting for a while beside a wild rose, with his poem:

THE WILD ROSE

High in the silent forest
a wild rose sits. In its center
a harmless sun rests. Its petals
are wings of a baby chick.
Its leaves are hands waving
goodbye.

Adam Lewis

The delicacy of language and imagery parallels the fragility of the rose. "A harmless sun" is a wonderful metaphor for the flower's sun-like stamens, and the last image, in which leaves are seen as "hands waving / goodbye," suggests the transience of all living things, not only of the flower.

These kinds of insights come from the students when we gather again to share our poems. "It makes the flower seem like a person who's going somewhere. Maybe not coming back for a long time," one student remarked. Some students affirm the idea, while others volunteer other perspectives, and the writer listens, sometimes shyly, mostly pleased, and often happily surprised by his or her own poem.

Commenting on each other's work, especially outside the classroom environment, creates a unique communal experience and noncompetitive atmosphere in which students learn things about themselves and the world that they never considered before. And what better place to write and read about a wild rose than in the mountains on a spring morning while its fragrance mingles with the smells of pine and canyon life?

The following poem approaches that place in poetry where the barriers between thought and speech dissolve into simple acts of praise:

SHOWY GREEN GENTIAN

What are you,
a falling star,

or hidden fire growing
 quietly by yourself?
 Showy Green Gentian,
 what a beautiful name!
Rosemary Fairbanks

The effortless conversational tone, so spontaneous and direct, reveals an intimacy with the subject which the young writer might not have achieved at her desk by simply looking at a wild-flower photo. It also accents the personal impact of the outdoor, observing/writing process that keeps students connected to what is most human in them and in their perceptual relationship with their environment.

The idea of “poetry field trips” does not imply that creative writing cannot happen in the classroom, for imagination can be stirred in any environment. But the imagination relies on senses not dulled by routine, by schedules, or by school bells moving us so quickly from one activity to another that we no longer hear them.

* * *

Silvi Alcivar

Silvi Alcivar, graduate of the Pennsylvania State University’s MFA program, lives in San Francisco and teaches poetry workshops for nursing home residents with the IOA’s Center for Elders Youth and the Arts program. One workshop includes sixth graders, another is taught entirely in Spanish. All her elder students are over the age of 60 and most have never written a poem before.

Becoming an Ocean: Teaching Poetry in Nursing Homes

In the marrow of my bones, I need poetry class for the forest of joy to come into my heart, to live in my fantasy of riding a unicorn, feeling as if I can fly with the expansion of my mind.

The Marvel of Poetry
 by the CC Poets

I’ve always loved elders, and would like to teach them poetry, but I’ve never even been in a nursing home. What’s it like?

That’s a big question! It’s hard to say. No two nursing homes are alike. You might find that your work with elders doesn’t take you to a nursing home at all but a day-facility, an assisted living home, or a private residence.