

LEARNING ASSESSMENT OF TWO 400-LEVEL CREATIVE WRITING COURSES

Overview by Professor Jason brown

Instructors Garrett Hongo and Marjorie Celona have evaluated Creative Writing 435 and 445 in terms of Learning Outcome #4: “Familiarity with fundamental concepts, forms, modes, and traditions in literary fiction and/or poetry.”

Six students enrolled in Garrett Hongo’s Creative Writing 435. Grades earned were A+, A, A- (2), B+, and B-. Using a numerical scale 1-5, scores for Learning Outcome #4 would be thus: 5, 5, 5, 5, 4, and 3. Professor Hongo determined that all but one student’s final portfolio demonstrated “familiarity with fundamental concepts, forms, modes, and traditions in literary poetry,” as stated in terms of the Program’s Learning Outcome #4.” Two students were outstanding and both would be competitive for MFA Programs nationally (one was admitted with full aid to Alabama for next year). Two others were also very strong, falling just below a level competitive for admission to strong MFA programs, yet showing promise of improvement. One student (an adult completing her B.A.) was also very good, though she had trouble completing her work in a timely manner and revising it to bring out its best potential. One student performed below the level of the rest and skipped the final two weeks of the term.

Professor Hongo recommends that the program might re-visit the overall coherence of the course offerings at the undergraduate level and consider creating a consistent plan of offerings every year, making the 300-level workshop available for two terms, and the 400-level available for only one term—perhaps Spring—so that students might make their plans early in the academic year and more easily fit their skill levels to the courses offered. The one underperforming student enrolled in CRWR 435 as it was scheduled during his last term at UO and wanted desperately to take a course in poetry. Yet, he hadn’t had the opportunity to take a 300-level workshop beforehand (the one offered that term had filled) and had persuaded me he was up to the level of the work at the 400-level.

Thirteen students enrolled in Assistant Professor Celona’s Creative Writing 435. Using a 1-5 scoring system for Learning Outcome #4. Four students scored five; four students scored four; three students scored three; two students scored two.

According to Assistant Professor Celona, The final portfolios for Spring 2017 CRWR 445 consist of a workshop draft of approximately 4,000 to 6,000 words and a “radical” revision of approximately 2,000 words. By forcing students to cut the work by half or more, they must a) address matters of diction and syntax with the precision of a poet; b) preserve only what is essential in the story, often excising minor characters, reimagining narrative structure, and deleting unnecessary plot points and c) re-evaluate unnecessarily long beginnings and unsatisfying endings, among other matters.

Assistant Professor Celona recommends that the program pare down the course to one workshop draft and a revision (or multiple revisions) of that draft, and devote the latter weeks to intense discussion and practice of revision techniques, rather than going through

the motions of a second workshop. Or do a mini-workshop in small groups of the revision as well. She also suggests that instructors give every student a “model” story to emulate as part of the revision process—not necessarily asking the student to parody the entire story, but rather to focus on, say, Hemingway’s use of dialogue or Moore’s use of narrative structure. She wonders if the program would benefit from offering the literary seminar at the 300-level and make it a prerequisite for 445. She asserts that students must learn how to read as writers (and how to write as writers, too). She acknowledges, however, that staffing issue could prevent such a curricular change.

Assessment of CRWR 445: Advanced Fiction Writing, Spring 2017
Instructor: Marjorie Celona

Learning Outcome #4: “Familiarity with fundamental concepts, forms, modes, and traditions in literary fiction.”

Scoring of Portfolios

		<i>Numerical Score (between 1 and 5)</i>
Jayne Chapman	Portfolio 1	2
Darienne Christiansen-Miller	Portfolio 2	3.5
Dolan Jones	Portfolio 3	4
Mikhela Kurzhal	Portfolio 4	3
Serena Maas	Portfolio 5	4
Isaac Bell	Portfolio 6	2
Justina Oland	Portfolio 7	5
Cat Phetsomphou	Portfolio 8	3
Grazia Rutherford-Swan	Portfolio 9	5
Tiffany Scott	Portfolio 10	5
Anna Shelby	Portfolio 11	3
Joey Walters	Portfolio 12	3.5
Jack Wiegand	Portfolio 13	5

Observations and Recommendations

The final portfolios for Spring 2017 CRWR 445 consist of a workshop draft of approximately 4,000 to 6,000 words and a “radical” revision of approximately 2,000 words. By forcing students to cut the work by half or more, they must a) address matters of diction and syntax with the precision of a poet; b) preserve only what is essential in the story, often excising minor characters, reimagining narrative structure, and deleting unnecessary plot points and c) re-evaluate unnecessarily long beginnings and unsatisfying

endings, among other matters. The model for this exercise is Raymond Carver's "A Small, Good Thing" versus its "radical," much shorter counterpart, "The Bath."

A familiarity with fundamental concepts, forms, modes, and traditions in literary fiction does not, unfortunately, always translate into proficient or interesting fiction. Nor is it always possible to deduce familiarity with such concepts from the written work. Thus, I found the numerical scoring difficult. In the case of Portfolio 12, for instance, I know that the student is familiar with the aforementioned, and yet there's a real disconnect in his knowledge and his creative abilities. His initial draft, in particular, belied any previous writing instruction, riddled as it was with rudimentary errors.

But I digress.

Certain students made great strides after I suggested master works for them to emulate during revision (Portfolio 11 parodied "How to Become a Writer" by Lorrie Moore; and Portfolio 9 parodied Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"). Yet many of the revisions were unsatisfying due to a number of factors:

- 1) the quarter system makes it all but impossible for students to submit two workshop drafts and an adequate revision (indeed, this is what would be required during a semester). By week 10, the students have effectively "checked out," and thus the revisions are hastily done. So what I expect to be the strongest work submitted is often the weakest.
- 2) much time is spent on matters on craft, but little time is ever spent on what it means to revise a text. Thus, the students' workshop drafts are often stronger than their revisions, which poses a conundrum when it comes time to evaluate "progress," as, in fact, often the story has weakened considerably.

My recommendations then are as follows:

- 1) pare down the course to one workshop draft and a revision (or multiple revisions) of that draft, and devote the latter weeks to intense discussion and practice of revision techniques, rather than going through the motions of a second workshop. Or do a mini-workshop in small groups of the revision as well.
- 2) give every student a "model" story to emulate as part of the revision process—not necessarily asking the student to parody the entire story, but rather to focus on, say, Hemingway's use of dialogue or Moore's use of narrative structure.
- 3) offer 414 at the 300-level and make it a prerequisite for 445. We must teach, especially our literature majors, how to read as writers (and how to write as writers, too). Too often, they seem stuck in the 19th century (for instance, they are continually amazed/surprised by free indirect style, as though it were some recent development).

- 4) offer a course (one of the experimental course numbers, perhaps) that focuses solely on revision.

Assessment of CRWR 435: Advanced Poetry Writing, Winter, 2017
Instructor: Garrett Hongo

Six undergraduates enrolled in CRWR 435 this past Winter term. We met weekly, students working on a term-long project of their own concept and design, most accomplishing a suite or sequence of five poems. Facility ranged from mediocre to excellent in terms of the writing, but, in critique, overall performance was good across the board. Grades earned were A+, A, A- (2), B+, and B-.

Using a numerical scale 1-5, scores would be thus: 5, 5, 5, 5, 4, and 3.

All but one student's final portfolio demonstrated "familiarity with fundamental concepts, forms, modes, and traditions in literary poetry," as stated in terms of the Program's Learning Outcome #4. Two students were outstanding and both would be competitive for MFA Programs nationally (one was admitted with full aid to Alabama for next year). Two others were also very strong, falling just below a level competitive for admission to strong MFA programs, yet showing promise of improvement. One student (an adult completing her B.A.) was also very good, though she had trouble completing her work in a timely manner and revising it to bring out its best potential. Finally, one student performed below the level of the rest and skipped the final two weeks of the term.

My observation is that we might re-visit the overall coherence of the course offerings at the undergraduate level and consider creating a consistent plan of offerings every year, making the 300-level workshop available for two terms, and the 400-level available for only one term—perhaps Spring—so that students might make their plans early in the academic year and more easily fit their skill levels to the courses offered. The one underperforming student enrolled in CRWR 435 as it was scheduled during his last term at UO and wanted desperately to take a course in poetry. Yet, he hadn't had the opportunity to take a 300-level workshop beforehand (the one offered that term had filled) and had persuaded me he was up to the level of the work at the 400-level.

If enrollments warrant, we might consider offering the 300-level workshop during Fall and Winter terms and the 400-level only during Spring term.

As an aside, our "literature" courses could also benefit from more coherent planning. This past Spring term, Professor Doran and I both taught undergraduate literature courses in poetry and, though I was extremely pleased with the performance of my seven students, I wondered if my enrollments and hers might've been healthier had her 300-level course and my 400-level course been staggered over two terms rather than scheduled for the same term (and thus competing for similarly prepared students). I

recommend we consider a staggered schedule for these undergraduate literature courses as well.