



Writing Here, Writing Now; Making Sense of It All: Examining Cultural and Historical Context in the Introductory Creative Writing Class

Oindrila Mukherjee

Grand Valley State University

mukherjo@gvsu.edu

Abstract: *Writers are a product of their environment. The time and place in which they live inevitably impact what they write, why they write, and how they write. I assign a brief reflection essay in my Introduction to Creative Writing class which asks students to consider social, historical, and cultural factors that influence the poetry, fiction, or nonfiction they write, either directly or indirectly. It encourages students to identify patterns in their writing, and to reflect on what it means to live in a specific part of the world at a specific time in history. This makes them more aware of the world around them and encourages critical thinking. The reflection essays are often insightful and moving and highlight the diversity of background and experiences that students bring to the classroom. Here I discuss the purpose of this assignment, challenges instructors might face, and strategies to make it more effective and useful.*

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“Our histories cling to us. We are shaped by where we come from.”

— Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Few writing instructors would argue that art is created in a vacuum. That a writer’s process and product are not influenced by the time and place in which they live. And yet, creative writing classes have traditionally been perceived as spaces where we must focus exclusively on craft, without much discussion of the cultural forces that shape what, how, when, and why we write. I believe that such discussions are invaluable for beginning writers.

In recent years, I have designed an assignment for my introductory creative writing class at Grand Valley State University that provokes students to reflect, towards the end of the semester,

on the various historical and cultural forces that shape their writing. The assignment has proved to be so stimulating and yielded such insightful responses that I wish to share it with other instructors. While it is useful for students of more advanced creative writing courses as well, the assignment is particularly relevant for those taking an introductory multi-genre class, often as part of a General Education curriculum.

At my institution, WRT 219 or Introduction to Creative Writing fulfills both the Arts Foundation category in the Gen Ed program as well as a core requirement for Writing majors. The class is therefore made up of our majors who plan to take more advanced creative writing classes in the future, students who wish to minor in Writing, exploratory students who have yet to make up their minds about a major and, most commonly, students from various disciplines who will likely never take another creative writing class. The course must therefore cater to the varying needs of a very diverse student population.

One of the Student Learning Outcomes for the Arts Foundation courses in our Gen Ed program is to *Explain historical and cultural contexts for artists and their works*. An obvious way to assess this learning outcome would be through a quiz or exam on the biographical details of a published author or through the analysis of a literary text with the author's background in mind. In other words, biographical or cultural criticism of readings assigned in class could meet this objective. However, while this would be interesting, it might be more relevant to a traditional English lit class or a class where the emphasis is on appreciation and analysis of art rather than practice.

The emphasis in the creative writing class must remain on developing creative writing skills—that is, learning techniques of craft and applying them to students' own, original, writing, rather than focusing disproportionately on published works by other writers. Nearly every student who signs up for this class does so because they want to write poetry, fiction, or nonfiction. They either enjoyed creative writing in high school or like to read books or want to write a fantasy novel someday. Often, they want a little respite from the more academic or technical writing they are required to do in their other classes.

To strike a balance between creativity and analysis, I therefore ask students to reflect on the historical and cultural context in which they themselves write. The culminating assignment follows weeks of discussion, readings, and writing, and leads students organically to a thoughtful reflection on both their process and the pieces they produce.

The mission of Grand Valley's Gen Ed program is to “foster critical-thinking, creative problem solving, and cultural understanding for the benefit of lifelong learning and global citizenship.” In these current times, the importance of these skills cannot be overemphasized. As an immigrant from a developing country, I am acutely aware of the socio-historical contexts that have shaped me as a writer. Making connections between one's own experiences and the

world in which we live is essential to my teaching philosophy, which aims to increase awareness among students of the world around them.

There is sometimes a reluctance to discuss history or politics in creative writing classes at any level. I remember a graduate workshop with a celebrated (and accomplished) American writer where the discussion revolved around E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*. When I raised my concerns about the problematic representation of Indians by Forster, who wrote the novel when the British still governed India and who, despite his best intentions, was influenced by his time and place, the professor was reluctant to discuss the issue. I recall a student insisting that what I had brought up was irrelevant in that setting because we were assembled there only to discuss craft. I assign the reflection essay in my own course because I believe it is never too early for writers to begin thinking about these concerns.

One of the experiences that revealed to me the extent to which young students might be divorced from the cultural context in which art is produced came early in my career as a tenure-track professor. When teaching Jamaica Kincaid's piece "Girl" in the same introductory course discussed here, I noticed a pattern of responses where students perceived the setting of the piece as primitive and foreign, patriarchal and outdated, and therefore quite different from their own world. Since the students had not previously encountered Kincaid's work, I provided information about her upbringing in Antigua—a colonized Caribbean nation—in the fifties and sixties. Inevitably, the discussion gradually transitioned into a conversation about gender roles and expectations in their own, Western, society. Often, we found that perhaps the two societies had more in common than at first glance. These early discussions that veered into cultural and historical topics made me reflect on the connections between these conversations and the writing that students themselves were producing.

The transition from well-known authors out there in the world to ourselves begins to happen among students as I share with them examples from my own life. I tell them, for instance, about the monsoon. After months of oppressively high temperatures and tropical sun, the monsoon rains are a much anticipated and welcomed seasonal phenomenon in the lives of most Indians. Many famous Indian poets such as Rabindranath Tagore have celebrated rainfall in their work. Rain—not sunshine or spring—is depicted as a catalyst for romance in Bollywood cinema and other popular cultural modes in the Subcontinent. Without intending to imitate those, I have found myself drifting towards writing about rain.

When I first introduce the assignment to students, it is usually met with skepticism and some bewilderment. Most of them find it intimidating because they have never really given their own cultural and historical contexts much thought, at least not in relation to what they are writing. By the end of the semester, however, they are enthusiastic about the metacognitive aspects of the assignment and impressed with the discoveries they make in the process. Their reflections yield insights that are often revelatory and extremely useful to me as an instructor as well.

Here I describe the assignment in three component parts, which I then discuss with examples from student responses.

i. Search for patterns in your work.

Read all the pieces you have composed throughout this semester—every poem, every flash essay or story, every scene, every brief writing prompt. Do you notice any patterns? What subjects or themes are you drawn to over and over? What objects do you tend to mention across different works? What food do you describe more than once? Which member of your family do you find yourself writing about frequently?

Often, students start out by saying they had never thought about their writing in this way until now. They identify topics, themes, settings and types of characters that tend to recur in their writing, sometimes across genres. The sense of discovery inherent in this journey can be gratifying in itself. It is, however, only the first step.

ii. Reflect on your upbringing and identify factors that have played a significant part in your life thus far.

Consider how factors in your environment may have shaped you, consciously or unconsciously. Think about the landscape in which you grew up, the society you belong to, your ethnicity, class, gender. Think about books you read, music you listen to, movies you watch. What are the predominant religious beliefs in your family and community? What about political views? What is the socio-economic status of most people in your neighborhood? Your high school? How has the use of technology impacted your generation? In short, how are you a product of your environment?

One of the challenges I noticed early on is that students naturally gravitate towards their personal experiences such as their parents' divorce, a grandparent's death, or their own recent breakup. While these are obviously valuable, they do not, by themselves, count as cultural and historical factors. To help guide them towards shared cultural rather than personal influences, I now provide a list of broad areas such as technology, race and ethnicity, religious values, political beliefs, class, gender, and geography. I remind students to think not of their own views and beliefs but those shared by their community whether it be family, neighborhood, town or city. I also ask them to think about the institutions they have been a part of, such as school, workplace, and church. I remind them that cultural and historical forces that impact them individually are also likely to impact the rest of their generation. These prompts trigger revealing insights about intersectionality, as students think about the different identities they assume and the different groups or categories they belong to.

A large percentage of students at Grand Valley have grown up in small towns in West Michigan. They recognize the political views of these towns as predominantly conservative and the demographic as predominantly white. Several students talk about the tradition of going to church on a regular basis and lessons of conventional Christian morality they grew up with. However, while this is the dominant narrative in my classes, it is by no means the only one. Some students write about life in big cities in the Midwest. Kaliyah Langston, for instance, mentions growing up in an African American neighborhood of Chicago where she lost friends to gun violence.

Besides religion, demographics, and other social factors, students often list cultural influences ranging from social media and video games to fantasy novels or reality TV. More than one person has mentioned the value of having instant—and constant—access to an online thesaurus.

When I was an undergraduate student in postcolonial India, my greatest cultural influences were voluminous novels by white, usually dead, British writers. Hearing where my students are getting their ideas from has been useful for me as an instructor. Whether it's YouTube videos of spoken word poetry, flash fiction on Twitter, or video games like *World of Warcraft*, the way in which our students consume art, news, and literature has of course been transformed by technological innovations. It is inevitable that these influence their writing process, style, and content in our classes.

iii. Make connections between the factors identified above and the patterns you detected in your writing.

Look at these two lists side by side. Which of these factors has contributed to the themes and topics in your writing? How do they influence your style, or your preference in genre? How do they impact your process (that is, where you write, when you write, and how you write?) Think about not only what you write but also what you *don't* write. Consider any and all ways in which your world shapes your creative writing. What are your thoughts on these?

This is of course the most exciting part of the assignment.

A subject that recurs significantly in these reflections is what the students themselves identify as the relative lack of diversity in West Michigan. Instead of denying the reality, students are quick to acknowledge how it impacts their writing choices. The results are often poetic and poignant. Sydney Stiles says her characters were raised “the same way” as she herself was. She points out that she attended a conservative public school: “In all my writing classes, I was surrounded by others writing the same types of things as me.” As a result, she often sets her work in “a small town where everyone knows each other.” Then comes this pastoral vision of their idealized home life—“They almost always live in a small cottage...and are cozy

inside their warm house on a cold snowy day.” Sydney is only one of numerous writers who replicate their own experiences in their writing, even when it is fictional. In her case, it was unconscious until she did this assignment. “I did not really realize how much I did this until recently, and now I truly understand why.”

While it is not my job to influence my students politically, it is important to remember that writing is a political act. The ethics of representation are especially important to me due to my own intersectional identity as a woman, an immigrant, and a BIPOC writer. Especially in the times in which we live, an awareness of assumptions, habits, and implicit biases seems valuable for students regardless of the discipline or course. One of the most satisfying outcomes of this assignment has been to witness how students themselves, with absolutely no nudging from me, reach conclusions about their own strengths and limitations when it comes to representing people of color in their work. Sometimes they are overly critical of their writing when viewed through a political lens. At other times, they do not evaluate but merely identify. This is a significant first step.

A miscalculation I have made with this assignment in the past is leaving it until the very end of the semester, which leaves little room for discussion with the whole class.

The need for conversations became clear to me when I read a reflection where the student said she loves to write about young African American characters who live in a bustling city like Chicago. For her it provides a sense of rebellion or escape because she herself, like many of her peers, grew up in a small town that lacked diversity. She wishes to write stories that contrast with her hometown and help bring out her rebellious side. For instance, some of her black characters are “bad” young women with tattoos and facial piercings that reinforce their individualism.

What is interesting about this confession is that the student in question is not African American herself. She is a white student who wants to write about black characters. Of course, this fascination might be problematic though well-intentioned. The portrayal of black female characters as fierce and irreverent by a white writer needs to be critiqued in class discussions, where other students are likely to point out or at least raise questions about cultural appropriation.

I have decided that from now on I will assign this essay with sufficient time to include some sort of workshop, at least in small groups, where students can read and discuss each other’s reflections. It would be as revealing for them to hear how other peoples’ experiences might diverge from their own as it is to discover new things about themselves.

On the other end of the spectrum from the student mentioned above is Alex Csenar, a Writing major who readily admits his reluctance to write about persons of color. One of the

things I'm particularly interested in detecting is what we do not write. What is missing from a student's stories, poems, and essays? Alex says, "I find it very difficult to write characters that aren't white and male, as I fear I may create unrealistic people." He worries that any character he creates might end up sounding like a "white man." In a statement of remarkable honesty, he adds, "My experiences in life have been limited to the predominantly white town I grew up in and the largely male friend group I talked to. I understand how important diversity is, and I applaud the diversity in modern cinema and television, but I, as a lone writer, struggle with creating such representation in my own stories."

Then there is Hamlet Arnott, a Theatre and Writing major, who grew up in a "very puritanical environment." They say, "When I was younger my characters tended to be very cookie-cutter, straight, cis, white people. However, as I began to realize both who I was as a person and how unrepresentative and *boring* that was, I began to push back significantly against that image." Now, they consciously attempt to make their cast of characters more diverse and representative. Like Alex above, Hamlet says they are not an expert on race or the experiences of people of color. Hamlet appears to have, however, figured out one of the ways in which to address this challenge: "A major portion of any project has recently become seeking out people of those backgrounds and denominations and hearing first-hand what their experiences are like, in order to make sure that I accurately represent the people I am writing about, rather than simply sticking with what I know."

Such candor is not uncommon from the students. The essays often have a confessional tone to them. I am repeatedly struck by how honest the students are when discussing their background and influences. When I wrote to former students seeking permission to refer to their reflections in this essay, most of them agreed readily and thanked me for my interest. In a sense, this reflection assignment is a personal essay (although I grade it not for style but only for content), a genre that most students enjoy reading and writing. In fact, the tendency to personalize experiences that I mentioned above is a testament to how comfortable they are with sharing personal stories.

The guidelines and examples I provide attempt to steer them away from the personal to a broader understanding of how we are all shaped as artists by our surroundings. I encourage students to make connections between their personal experiences and the place and time in which they live. This has resulted in many insightful responses. Let's take the issue of mental health, for instance. Amy Allen points out that the stereotypical or simplistic ways in which mental health problems are portrayed in pop culture, and in particular by Hollywood, inspired her to write about these in her own work in an attempt to change the narrative. Another student in the same class, Maia Jones, says she has been influenced by the growing awareness of mental health issues among black writers in particular. Both these students wanted to talk about mental illness because of their own personal experiences with

it. However, they successfully maneuvered the conversation away from just their own lives to a larger societal problem.

I want to reiterate that I do not make value judgments based on their responses. It would be unfair to ask students to disclose information about their lives and then to make them feel uncomfortable about any of it. It would certainly not encourage candor. The goal is never to tell them whether a certain way of doing things is morally sound or not. Cecil Day Lewis said, “I write not to be understood but to understand.” My chief objective with this assignment is to have students begin the process of understanding themselves, the world in which they live, and how art comes into being. When a student arrives at a realization by themselves, the assignment has accomplished its purpose. Now the student is thinking like a cultural critic and theorizing about their generation, their society, and their culture. Suddenly, the introductory creative writing course becomes much more than that. It becomes an essential part of a liberal arts education.

The underlying principles of Gen Ed programs everywhere aim to nurture critical thinking skills and enable students to make connections across disciplines. An arts-based Gen Ed course such as creative writing allows students who major in vastly divergent fields ranging from the Health Sciences to Business and Computer Science to Philosophy to explore their creative side. My assignment allows students from diverse disciplines to utilize their unique perspectives and skills. Students should be encouraged to make connections between their own disciplines and creative writing and to bring their knowledge from courses in their major to their reflections. The Psychology major can discuss mental health issues faced by both the writer and their characters, the Computer Science major can discuss the role of information technology on process, the Photography major can reflect on how cultural context influences their photography too.

One student does exactly this when they borrow an important lesson from their Women and Gender Studies class—that society plays a role in constructing gendered norms and stereotypes. “After learning this,” they say in their reflection, “I began making a conscious effort to construct my characters in a way that does not align with societal gender norms. For example, if describing a girl as beautiful, I would try to add something that may typically be thought of as a male characteristic such as the girl being highly intelligent and pursuing a career in engineering.” Another student reflects on the impact of their Biology classes on what they write. “I have noticed,” they say, “that many times I have written about pollution in our smaller writing prompts or how the biodiversity is being affected by humans because this is a topic I feel strongly about.” The cross section of students from across campus is what makes the introductory creative writing class a particularly rich interdisciplinary experience for all concerned, one that is manifested in this culminating assignment.

Apart from educating students, the assignment may help enlighten instructors. For my part, learning where student stories and ideas are coming from has been illuminating.

Reading their reflections serves a selfish purpose for me, as I learn new things about the world in which I now live and teach.

This is especially true when it comes to technology. As a Generation Xer who grew up in India, I was exposed to none of the technology that my students routinely use in their lives. Through the reflections I have learned about specific sources of inspiration. One student says, for instance, that they gravitate toward videos on YouTube where soothing background music accompanies spoken word poetry performed by the artist Miles Carter. They add, “I turn [to] YouTubers and let them read and talk to me.”

The reliance on technology is of course a double-edged sword, something the students recognize. Looking at both sides together as a group can lead to rich discussions. For example, while Grace Spellman says the influence of texting and emails “keeps writing minimal and straightforward,” on the other hand, Carly Andrus writes, “Technology has impacted everyone in that it is seen as okay to constantly be on your phone, going on social media, instead of talking to others wherever you are. I believe this has impacted my writing because it holds me back from experiences that I would have if I weren’t on my phone so much.”

One of the most astute observations came from the class I taught remotely in the summer of 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, and revealed how online instruction can impact both writing process and product. Ivy Baillie says, “Rather than an open textbook and a physical notepad, my workspace is transient and not fully physical. I will write a few sentences, jump back to the prompt, open a new browser to research, get sidetracked, find inspiration again, and go back to writing. In this way, the process surrounding my writing has become increasingly complexified. I see how my altered process results in stylistic choices that reflect the nature of technology itself.” Ivy, an English major, goes on to draw a parallel between herself and her character. “In Prompt 14, I write of a despondent character, looking out the window into the seemingly alive world below. Yet rather than detail this in a concrete manner, this character jumps rapidly from observing those at the corner store, to a spoon resting on the windowsill. They maintain the same intensity in both scenes, much like I do when I move from prompt to open browser.”

From their engagement with nature and the outside world, to coping with mental illness, to playing video games, to reading fantasy novels—our students’ lives are full. While their experiences may not be the same as mine, they are myriad and constantly changing. This assignment is an opportunity to have conversations with our students about where they are coming from.

Occasionally, a reflection may even lead instructors to reconsider their choice of readings and resources. For instance, here is Waverly Eubanks, an African American student and Political Science major, talking about the “very specific experience formed from the intersections

of blackness and womanhood.” Her comments highlight the need to be more inclusive when assigning texts in our classes. “I was never required to read Alice Walker or Maya Angelou,” she says. “I was required to read *The Bell Jar* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, both books about womanhood and blackness, but neither about both... Because what surrounds me does not fully relate to my lived experiences, I figured I could do it myself, if only to recount my own life.”

It must be noted that not everything that comes up in these reflections is dark or overtly political. One of the best things about living in West Michigan is the landscape. If the Generation Z students here rely heavily on technological innovations to learn, they are also, ironically, surrounded by natural beauty. Lakes, beaches, parks and walking trails often form the setting in their poems, personal essays, and stories. They write poems on winter and nonfiction pieces about a hiking trip or a canoeing adventure. Tranquility and calm are usually just a stone’s throw away, a welcome respite from the troubles that confront the young writers. This has been especially therapeutic during the pandemic. Grace Allen writes, “I get to experience the beach every day, climb sand dunes, go fishing and boating. I think those factors have impacted my creative writing by making it more descriptive and calmer.” Paige Smith talks about how she would spend countless hours in the lake as a child. “I was the child that was always in the water, and now, even as a 23-year-old, I often find myself drawn to bodies of water. This comes through in my writing but also through the art I collect for my home, and the art I create.”

An interesting—and poetic—insight comes from Jared Boeve. “Sometimes I look up at the branches of a tree or at the clouds and I think of characters for stories. I feel like my writing is impacted by a yearning for adventure due to the fact that I am not very well traveled. This is why I have been drawn to books and stories my whole life, specifically books about northern barbarians or Vikings traversing rivers. I think my affinity for these stories is a direct cause of some of the harsher winters I have lived in and the wild forested land and rivers I have grown up around.”

Evidently, this assignment leads students to reflect more deeply on what they read as well as write. At the end of the semester, I like to return to discussions of writers whose backgrounds are very different from that of the students. The writers assigned may be from another country like Kincaid, or from another time period like Edgar Allen Poe, or merely from another region in the United States such as Kevin Young. It is interesting to see how readily the students now gravitate towards topics of cultural and historical context when responding to published work. We have come full circle.

This assignment can be modified by individual instructors and adapted for online teaching and discussions. Instructors may wish to focus more on some topics than others or ask more specific questions of their students, such as how the pandemic or Black Lives Matter in particular have impacted their process and writing. They may wish to invite direct comparisons

between patterns in published works and in their own. It might be useful to have students detect influences at work in each other's writing in a workshop setting. I plan to try out some of these variations in the future.

When my students leave my class, I hope they feel transformed, not only because they got to try out some interesting writing exercises or because they read each other's work in a safe space, although these are no doubt important. I want them to think about what shapes them and their writing. Whether or not they go on to write more fiction, creative nonfiction, or poetry in their lives, I believe they are equipped with the necessary tools with which to reflect critically on their own experiences and on the world around them, tools that are essential to any writer. It is my hope that this assignment can contribute to their development as writers and readers and, perhaps more importantly, as citizens of their community and the world.

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