Feature Article

Creative Writing Portfolios

Cameron Smith
Chubu University

This paper discusses a portfolio approach to EFL short story writing. With particular reference to the literature on creativity, it emphasizes the use of portfolios to demonstrate student mastery of the relevant “domain” (literary writing) skills while accommodating aspects of the creative process which are best left unanalyzed and undescribed. Literary writing skills here refer to a basic understanding of story structure and characterization, vocabulary use, use of metaphor and symbolism, pace and so on. Examples are given from a course in creative writing that the author has been teaching for the past few years.

本稿は、EFL学習者を対象とした短編小説ライティングにおけるポートフォリオ研究について検討するものである。創造性研究に関する文献に触れながら、本稿の焦点は、ポートフォリオの活用方法に当てられるが、学習者がこの分野（文学的ライティング）を中心にライティング力をいかに習得していくかをたどるだけでなく、ともすれば分析や説明の対象とならないことが多い創作過程にも目を向けることついて議論する。本稿で述べる文学的なライティングスキルとは、ストーリー構成、登場人物の役付け、語彙表現、メタファーやシンボリズムの活用、物語のテンポなどの習得を意味する。本稿における事例は、この数年間著者が実践してきた「クリエイティブ・ライティング」という授業を通して集められたものである。

EFL writing portfolios can perform a variety of functions such as a record of achievement, a record of the learning process, or a means of promoting learner reflection (Nunes, 2004). This last function, where students reflect on their learning and on the decisions they make in

the process of producing and revising texts, has gained popularity as a means of promoting autonomy (Chen, 2006). However, while creative activity needs to be essentially autonomous, as a classroom activity it does not suit a process approach. The field of creativity research helps us to understand why, and how creative writing portfolios, in order not to undermine students' creative efforts, might preferably become a record of skills acquisition, treating the activity as a form of genre writing, rather than as a record of the process of drafting and redrafting the final story.

Creative activity, instead of being a step-by-step process, can be highly recursive, entailing not simply revisions but often in the case of fiction writing, radical re-writes based on the imperative of seemingly minor adjustments (Csikszentmihalyi, 2007)—something often reflected in students abandoning a half-written story from one week, to produce a newer, better one the next. This can make assembling a portfolio that tracks the process somewhat unwieldy, insofar as the reasons for dramatic changes (why one story was abandoned in favor of a new idea) would need to be articulated on paper if the portfolio is to make sense to a reader. This explicit reflection in itself is a difficult and time-consuming task, which would be imposed precisely on those students that have more than others to do in the time remaining.

Indeed, creative insight is precisely that which is not produced by regulated analytical procedure, with many successfully creative people reluctant to dissect or publicly reflect on how they make their decisions (Csikszentmihalyi, 2007). The so-called incubation period that precedes creative leaps is, although well documented, poorly understood (Smith & Dodds, 1999). Therefore, asking students to reflect on creative decision-making may not only be a difficult task, it may also be psychologically inappropriate.

However, creativity research helps us to demystify the process and guide us to a more productive view of creative writing and the teaching of it. According to Mumford (2003, p. 110), there is "a general agreement

that creativity involves the production of novel, useful products." These products are produced within a domain—physics, fiction, art, history, etc. (Simonton, 1997)—and the ability to be creative has been found to depend (to varying extents) upon competence and knowledge of the domain (Baer, 2010; Jeon, Moon, & French, 2011). In fiction writing, this knowledge is frequently referred to as "the craft", as explained in writing courses and guides (Bell & Magrs, 2001). Cole, Sugioka, and Yamagata-Lynch (1999) argue that by using an approach that treats the production of creative work as a learned process, teachers can help to demystify and support creative activity in the classroom.

This approach, which emphasizes skills competence, mirrors arguments for genre writing (Hyland, 2007). Students benefit from instruction in specific language and structural aspects, and this style of instruction should take precedence over an organic (self) discovery process approach. As such, students need to study plotting and characterization, the greater use of non-core (Carter, 1998) vocabulary, the use of symbolism and metaphor, and the importance of pace, rhythm and sentence length.

Therefore, a story-writing portfolio need not contain previous drafts of stories and accounts of the overall editing process. Instead, along with the stories, the student needs to show mastery of the fundamental skills of the genre. To this end, I have developed a coursebook that teaches these skills (Smith, 2010). The portfolio thus functions as both a showcase (the stories demonstrating what the students can do) and as a student-created reference of the domain relevant skills the students need to employ to successfully complete the writing task, while avoiding the problems of exposing creative processes to analysis.

Fry (2007) has argued that for poetry, being taught the form can often be enough for someone to begin to write far better poetry than they realized. In the case of story writing, I have found this absolutely to be true. In common with other teachers of creative writing (Holmes & Moulton, 2001), it is amazing what students can produce with a

little encouragement and structure.

Step-by-Step Implementation of the Portfolio

I teach a 15-week elective course on short story writing for low intermediate students upwards who are on the verge of being able to write five-paragraph essays. Students come from across the university and across years with humanities and science students sitting side by side. During the course, students write two short stories of around four to eight printed sides of A4 for each story (typically around 2,000 words or more). The difference between the two stories is in the narrative structure prescribed. Students are allowed to write any genre of story they like. The homework burden can be a little higher than in an ordinary course.

Week 1: Characters

The method of story planning I use emphasizes the fusion of character and plot, in particular how the plot emerges from characters' frustration attaining their goals. This key point dominates the first two weeks. Through discussion of characters in films and stories, students learn that the main character in a story is somebody who wants something he or she cannot have. In abstract, it may be love, validation, getting home, etc. That abstract goal has to be made concrete; for example, someone they desire, victory in a competition, reuniting their family, and so on.

For their portfolios, students need to demonstrate the ability to analyze a main character's goals and frustrations. A worksheet analyzing film characters is used. Films are more useful references than written stories because it is more likely that students will have seen the same film.

Students also need to demonstrate that they can create viable main characters themselves, which is done through asking them a series of

questions about a simple stick figure they have drawn. Students are asked to use a blank piece of paper and complete a worksheet. The two most crucial questions in this exercise are "What is it that they really want, but cannot have?" and "Why can't they get it?"

Students often struggle with the notion that goals are both concrete and abstract. For example, a student's character goal is a new car. Unless they can explain how that represents something more universal (e.g., taking someone on a date (love), or traveling cross-country (freedom)), you may need to ask them to change their idea. Students may also suggest obstacles to the character's goals that are too easy or impossible to surmount, making the character's struggle uninteresting. There is a worksheet in the book to help students understand these issues.

The importance of recursiveness requires stressing students that they do not have to commit to these ideas forever. At any time, they can go back and change anything they like. For their portfolios, they need only a neat write-up of their character designs to demonstrate that they understand the elements of a good character.

Week 2: Plot; Using Non-core Vocabulary

The main skills that students must demonstrate this week are the analysis and construction of plots. There are several universal frameworks for analyzing story structure; a four-point plotline of conflict, complication, crisis, and conclusion is used in class. In the conflict, the main characters' goals and obstacles are established. For example, Jill loves John, but John loves Stacey; or Sally wants to play baseball with the boys, but is forbidden because of her gender. The complication is the meat of the story that makes the crisis important or significant. For example, Jill discovers that Stacey is a spy; Sally's brother, who is on the baseball team, discovers he has a terminal illness. The crisis is the moment of truth when we find out whether the character gets what they want—Does Jill get John? Does Sally get to

play on the team (and does her brother survive?)—and the conclusion describes the outcome and aftermath. As an exercise, students analyze film plots, with an analysis of the first Spiderman film as a model. Their analysis of a film they have chosen goes into their portfolio.

Students now plan their stories, optionally using a worksheet. They are encouraged to plan the first and third stages first. As Stokes (2001, p. 209) wrote, once you have your characters in place, you have “a mosaic of conflicts, motives, dreams” that forms the conflict. The third stage crisis is the climactic scene where the character finally achieves or fails in the goal that has been decided. Students can then plan the middle stage complication, which explains how we get from conflict to crisis. This stage, which typically gives extra significance to achieving the goal (a character’s desire for money is heightened by the need to pay for a loved-one’s operation; lovers are sent further apart by malicious lies, etc.) requires the most creative thinking and thus the most time. Students should discuss their ideas with each other and the teacher (who can make suggestions to individuals), and will probably need to finish the plan for homework. At this early stage, many details for the final conclusion to the story are not required; the best ending usually becomes apparent once the story is close to being finished. For their portfolios, students should at least include their first plot plans to demonstrate they understand good story structure.

In this second week, using varied and more interesting vocabulary is studied. Central to this approach is encouraging students to move beyond “core vocabulary” (Carter, 1998). Examples of adjective work include moving beyond “beautiful” to “gorgeous” and “stunning”; from “cold” to “freezing”, “icy” and “chilly”. After completing a worksheet on a problematic text (problematic because the overuse of core vocabulary makes it dull), students write descriptions of their characters. These descriptions, along with the re-writing of a problematic text, can form part of the portfolio. In subsequent weeks, students also look at vocabulary for speaking (whispering, talking, shouting, hissing, etc.),

moving (skipping, leaping, creeping, etc.) and looking (gazing, staring, peering, etc.).

Week 3: Showing, Not Telling

This class tackles a common problem of students describing the story rather than writing it. In terms of the "craft", they are "telling" the reader, when they should be "showing". For example, a student might write "Peter is in love with Mary. But Mary loves Jack", rather than paint a picture of this love triangle (e.g., "Peter blushed furiously when Mary smiled at him. But she wasn't looking at him, she was looking through him to Jack on the far side of the room.") Students need to grasp this concept of showing, and demonstrate they can transform plot plan into a written story. They are given a worksheet in which they must transform factual statements about a person's emotional state into actions. In keeping with the principle of a portfolio as a demonstration of skills, this exercise can serve as an excellent reference for students when they later encounter problems of "telling" too much. For homework, students write the conflict stage.

Week 4: Editing the Conflict; Pace and Movement

From this point, the class begins with students reading each other's work with reference to the skills studied in previous weeks, and offering suggestions for improvement. It is better for students to focus on the creative writing issues – character, plot and use of language for effect, rather than issues of grammar, and a worksheet guides them in that. Indeed, the most effective teacher feedback is to discuss issues of story quality with students, while a copy of their work is handed back with grammar corrections noted. No formal reactive grammar teaching is undertaken unless there is a persistent chronic error.

Students do not need to keep copies of multiple drafts. The length and number of drafts (students are effectively writing around 500 words a week or more of new material, cumulatively adding up to

2,000 words plus), along with the possibility of radical changes to their story, make managing such a record impractical. However, students may be invited to include sample revisions of sections of their story as a demonstration of their ability to react to problems, should a good example arise.

Students also look at pace and movement, when you should use detail to slow the narrative down, and when you should be very economical to make it move faster. Skills tasks include re-writing problematic passages that move too slowly or too fast. Homework is to write their complication section, as well as revise their conflict section.

Week 5: Editing the Complication; Using Details

Students repeat the process of peer feedback of week 4, with questions about pace and vocabulary for movement. The skill focus this week is using small details to create an atmosphere. In one exercise, students list all the things they can see in the classroom – including heaters, flooring, the view from the window, the color of everything. These objects are divided into two groups of positive (new chairs, blue sky, green trees) and negative (dusty heater, cracked flooring, gray walls). Students write two paragraphs describing the room—one that makes it sound positive, and one that makes it sound negative—and these go into their portfolio. Homework is the completion of the story, as well as editing what they have already written.

Week 6: Editing & Review

By this stage, students should have almost finished their story. They review their own and each other's stories with the story-writing skills they have learnt in the first half of the course in mind. After this reflection, students draw up a To-Do list for their final edit. This consists of up to five main aims to improve their final draft.

Week 7: Final Week of the First Cycle

The students should now have finished the final version of their stories. In the past, self-reflection activities were performed, where students document how their views and ideas changed; I am no longer convinced such activities have any value. The stories that students write are often very moving, and some are clearly personal. As noted in the literature review, the judgments and decisions they make can be difficult to articulate, and in some cases, are better left unsaid. It is better to focus on the quality of the final product, treated as fiction. Therefore, students instead read each other's stories and give comments on what they liked best about them. The atmosphere in this class should be informal and positive. Writing stories takes a good deal of work—crossing the finishing line is, in itself, an achievement.

In the second half of the course, the students follow a similar pattern, only with a different technique for plotting and narrative. Students are asked to look at color, metaphor and simile, and how to avoid overwriting, as well as more vocabulary. The second cycle takes a week less.

The homework for the final class is to prepare their portfolios. A list of what the portfolio should contain is in Appendix A (first cycle only). The teacher can then collect the portfolios for grading.

Evaluation of Portfolios

Research shows that inter-rater reliability of teachers grading the creative writing (stories and poems) of young native speaking students is just as high as it is in academic writing (Baer, Kaufman, & Gentile 2004); there is no reason why assessment of the creative or aesthetic qualities of students' writing should prove difficult for EFL teachers. The textbook contains an example checklist that students (and teachers) can apply at the end of the first cycle based on the story-telling skills taught. It is not the case that all good stories will clearly contain all of

the suggested elements, but rather a badly written story will certainly be lacking some of them, and this should guide teachers in why certain stories work better than others.

For grading, the biggest weight goes to the stories the students have written. Compared to various exercises also submitted, the length and complexity of writing a whole story are far more significant. I do not like assigning percentage weightings to graded activities, preferring holistically to characterize what an S ("Special", equivalent to an A+ grade), A, B or C grade portfolio looks like. More detailed criteria, implicit in the rubric, are useful for determining the percentage awarded within the grade, and in dealing with borderline cases. As such, A and B grade descriptions have more details (Appendix B). In this method it is the final story, not its precise development that is graded. This is why drafts are not included in the portfolio, except where specific examples of editing serve as a good demonstration of the application of story-telling skills (see week 4). Grading each portfolio takes between 15 and 30 minutes, with almost all of this time spent reviewing the stories.

Table 1
Timetable for Creative Writing Portfolios

Class	Description
First class	Analysis of film characters Design main characters (first and final design go into portfolio)
Second class	Design the plot; vocabulary variety (first and final plot plan, and description of characters, vocabulary exercise go into portfolio)
Third class	Focus on showing rather than telling (show/tell exercises go into portfolio)
Fourth class	Peer reviewing first part of story (reviews go into portfolio) Focus on pace exercise goes into portfolio

Fifth class	Peer reviewing second part of story (reviews go into portfolio) Focus on details and atmosphere (optional: exercise in detail goes into portfolio)
Sixth class	Peer review of third and fourth parts (final peer review goes into portfolio)
Seventh class	Students share stories and praise the positive aspects of each. Second cycle begins.
[…Second cycle…]	
Final Class	Students share and then submit portfolios.

Conclusion

Although we cannot teach "creativity", instruction can clearly improve students' creative output. Creativity research provides clear evidence that learned competence is a key prerequisite for creative success. At the same time, the non-linear nature of creativity requires us to focus on skills rather than the management of a continuous, smooth process.

The biggest challenge for teachers in assigning this kind of portfolio is making sure that they themselves understand what they want the students to do. I strongly advise that teachers try to do the creative writing exercises themselves first (without necessarily writing a whole story, although you may also want to once you have planned it).

The biggest challenge for students is keeping up with the work. As an elective class, students may on the one hand be more prepared to work hard; on the other hand, as a non-core "fun" component of their studies, they are less likely to tolerate hard work. It is a consistent and pleasant surprise how much and how well students can write; some stories have genuinely moved me to the point of tears.

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Author Bio

Cameron Smith *is a lecturer at Chubu University. He taught English in Russia in the 1990s and in Japan since 2002. He received his PhD in Russian health reform from Edinburgh University before returning to language teaching. His interests include creative writing for foreign language learners. Email: cameron.smith@yahoo.co.uk.*

Appendix A

Your portfolio for your first story should contain:

A. Your original character designs
   An analysis of characters from two films
   Examples of concrete and abstract goals
   A description of your character using adjectives
B. Your original plot plan
C. Three peer review sheets, alongside your original drafts for each section
D. Your exercises on showing, not telling
   Your exercise on describing a place in detail to create atmosphere
E. Two final peer review sheets, along with your second final draft and your To-Do sheet.
F. Your final draft
G. Reflections

Appendix B

Grading criteria

Grade	Criteria
S	The student has completed two stories. Both contain well-formed characters, are interesting and exciting to read, and have applied all the elements of fiction-writing studied, or as many as appropriate. The portfolio contains clear evidence that the student understands how to construct and analyze stories, and how to exploit language items studied to good effect and how to critique writing style.
A	The student has completed two stories. Although generally well-formed, the stories lack certain elements studied, such that they are problematic – there is a lack of tension, an unjustifiable simplicity in vocabulary, or unsatisfactorily drawn characters. The stories may contain a certain amount of telling, rather than showing. The portfolios generally demonstrate that the student understands how to construct and analyze stories, and can exploit language items fairly well to create atmosphere and pace. The student can critique writing style.
B	The student has completed two stories with limited success. At least one of the stories has more serious problems with structure and characterization (for example, an absence of a middle complication section). Much of the emotional action is told, not shown and without good reason. Language is unnecessarily repetitive. Portfolio work indicates general understanding of story construction and analysis, and the ability to use non-core vocabulary to create atmosphere.
C	The student has completed one story, and made good progress with another. In general there is a lot of telling rather than showing, with little effort to use a variety of non-core vocabulary. Portfolio work is somewhat incomplete or lacking in effort.