

Social-Expressivist Strategies for Teaching Creative Nonfiction during Pandemic

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to explore the directions for teaching creative nonfiction during pandemic in Philippine K-12 setting. The paper also investigates the teacher-writers' perspectives on teaching creative nonfiction. The participants of the study were published teacher-writers teaching creative writing and creative nonfiction in the senior public high schools from the six school divisions of the Department of Education in the National Capital Region. Participants acknowledged the strength of social expressivist strategies for navigating the challenges of the pandemic to teaching creative nonfiction. Using a phenomenological approach to qualitative research, findings revealed that the most popular strategies used by teacher-writers under the social expressivist approach were the integration of performance tasks, e-zine, blogging, social media platforms, and other modern digital platforms. The teacher-writers also agreed on capitalizing on and emphasizing the genre's fluidity in the curriculum, leveraging the pedagogical use of personal experiences, and promoting Filipino local writers.

Keywords: social expressivism, strategies, teaching creative nonfiction, K-12 curriculum

Introduction

Since its inclusion into the K-12 curriculum under the Humanities and Social Sciences Strand, (HUMSS) creative nonfiction (CNF) has presented numerous difficulties to senior high school teachers of writing and literature. In the Philippines, CNF has traditionally been taught only in graduate schools that provide creative writing degrees, never in secondary level students with little to no writing experience (Hidalgo, 2015). Because the genre is thought to be theoretically derived from creative writing, composition, rhetorics, and journalism, there has been a lack of pedagogy, and teachers have been striving to identify a vantage point from which to teach the genre and connect the various theories about it (Fodrey, 2014).

Teachers have to deal with both the issues that come from the many fields in which CNF deals, as well as the difficulties of teaching writing itself, especially in the Philippines, where both teachers and students are not native speakers of English. Aside from the intrinsic limitations of teaching the genre, the pandemic has further restricted its instruction. The global pandemic has presented obstacles to all academic fields, necessitating teacher adaptation to make education work in times of pandemic. This inspired the researcher to investigate CNF pedagogical scholarship in pandemic contexts in order to synthesize and rationalize how writing professionals teach CNF or what they emphasize with their students about the genre, thereby exposing gaps and bringing up prospects for innovation.

This study also examines how teachers deal with the obstacles of teaching CNF and writing in general during the pandemic. The researcher hopes to acquire insights towards making CNF interesting for both teachers and students by exploring senior high school teachers' lived experiences in their CNF classes. The study sought to a) identify the various strategies used by teacher-writers in teaching creative nonfiction during the pandemic, and b) determine their overall approaches to teaching creative nonfiction.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative study that employs the phenomenological approach to capture the universality of a lived experience within a certain group in order to describe the essence of a specific phenomenon (Cresswell, 2014). It is critical to listen to and analyze teachers' ideological and experiential repertoires since it is via these self-disclosures that other teachers can gain an understanding of the phenomenon and be encouraged to act similarly (Moratilla, (2019). Social constructivism is the epistemology that influenced this qualitative study. As a result, the research interpretations and findings in qualitative research are context-specific in order to comprehend the experiences of Creative Nonfiction teachers in public senior high schools from K to 12. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were considered teacher-writers or those who have published literary outputs, trainers, and are adept at teaching creative writing and creative nonfiction.

The researcher used snowball sampling to get the required number of participants. Snowballing is a technique for increasing the sample size by requesting one informant or participant to recommend some others for interviews (Allen, 2017). The six participants who met the required conditions answered all questions as thoroughly as they could, based on their daily activities in their CNF online sessions. The researcher interacted with potential participants via emails and electronic chats via Facebook Messenger, as well as the administrators and coordinators of the senior high schools. The interviews were videotaped with the consent of all interviewees using a videoconferencing software. Following the interviews, the first phase in the raw data processing was data transcription, which involved translating the spoken words into codes that could be read and evaluated.

The researcher read the interview transcripts numerous times in order to become interested and acquainted with the data. She manually coded and examined the data after transcribing it and establishing a strong knowledge and understanding of it, following the seven procedures described by Philipp Adu (Adu, 2019). First, the researcher converted the Statement of the Problem (SOP) specific questions into anchor codes; (b) extracted phrases or clauses from interview transcripts as answers for the anchor codes; (c) coded or labelled the extracted answers; (d) categorized related or similar initially coded answers; (e) assigned themes to the categories; (f) formulated a construct based on the relationship between or among the themes; and (g) used diagrams as model of the research construct.

The researcher used a triangulation of information sources to fully grasp the phenomenon: herself, the six participants, and the reviewed literature. The researcher was involved in the data, but she tried to set aside her own knowledge, views, values, and experiences to correctly and objectively represent the participants' actual experiences through their interview responses. The six participants who met the three criteria gave detailed answers based on their daily activities in their various CNF classes.

Results and Discussions

Problem 1: What are the strategies for teaching creative nonfiction teacher-writers used during pandemic?

Performance tasks. The majority of participants gave online performance tasks. It is important to highlight that most participants use performance activities for more than just assessment purposes. Even though writing is a solitary activity, participants recognize the value of performances in CNF instruction. Students conduct performance tasks to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and competence. These activities result in a product or performance that shows learning (McTighe, 2015). This study's online performances include role-playing, using e-zines, presenting online dialogues, vlogging, and TED-like speeches.

According to one participant, after having her students write on their own, she likes to turn the writing into a performance activity. Learners choose tasks that require them to do rather than ones that require them to read a lot. A participant says that students in the HUMSS strand have a lot of interest in performing and arts, which is why she makes sure that this interest is kept alive in her writing. *“That seems to be the best way for them to do it. Students at HUMSS want to do more than just read. They want to do more hands-on things. Most of them also like art, which helps when they write about something in connection to art.”*

Some of the participants also agree with the idea of having performance activities in writing class. One of them says, *“I utilize these strategies because I believe a teacher must be a learning facilitator. So as a teacher, you should provide a variety of activities, especially these [performance activities]. Then students will participate and will not be bored throughout the period.”*

“Every time I teach a creative writing class, I kind of accept that there would be a student who would rather speak, perform, and do everything than write,” says another participant.

More research is being conducted on the ways in which performance and associated discourses aid teachers in the creation, theorization, teaching, and comprehension of writing. Performance has emerged as a key aspect in improving student literacy and it has been thoroughly integrated into student writing and the teaching of that writing (Fishman et al., 2005).

Use of social media and digital platforms. Social media and digital platforms have been a revolutionary way of teaching writing and has been found to be significant in improving students' writing skills (Haidari, Katawazai, & Mohd Yusof, 2020). Social media allows students to share their collaborative or individual thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Usage of social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram. These platforms allow students to put more effort into their writing, enhance their writing skills, and so build their writing confidence. A participant's remark captures the effect of blogging on learners: *“I want my students to blog and share their work on social media so that others can appreciate it as well as myself. Others who knew them were astounded that they could write.”*

Social Expressivism. Teachers' strategies do not consider writing as an isolated activity; rather, in the context of the pandemic, writing is viewed as a public act. Social expressivism in teaching writing allows the students to move from the personal to social. As a resultant theme, CNF must be viewed primarily as a social-expressivist endeavor that gratifies the desires of a romantic individualist who writes for the rewarding experience of crafting literary prose, as well as the socially conscious public intellectual who writes in the face of something important to people beyond the self (Fodrey, 2014).

CNF, when viewed through the lens of social expressivism, allows students to write for both themselves and society, while also acknowledging that each person has a role in the world around them. This can be seen in one participant's request that her students not talk about sensitive topics. She also said that she always tells her students to write in a way that takes into account the people who might read their stories: *“The suggestion I gave was to share it at the right time and with the right audience. I told them to remember that we have a group of people who read creative nonfiction, and we are concerned about their maturity level. You have to think about the timing and find a way to share your feelings and collective experiences.”*

A participant said that when CNF writing is linked to current trends and social issues, it always draws the attention of students. *“I think that when students aren't interested in literature, I need to connect with them and build a relationship with them so that they can see that literature is important and relevant to them.”* For example, if I come across a popular article on social media, I will ask them and encourage them to write about their thoughts and ideas about that social trend in

nonfiction, like a blog post. Because this strategy is based on social interaction, I think it will help them learn about literature.

Problem 2. How do the teacher writers approach the teaching creative nonfiction?

Theme 1. Emphasizing the genre's fluidity in the classroom. Participants encouraged other teachers to take advantage of creative nonfiction's versatility. People are becoming more interested in creative nonfiction because previously inaccessible fields such as history, physics, or the arts can now be discussed using creative nonfiction techniques, and this can provide an opportunity for the teacher to engage students. CNF has become a combination of different disciplines over the years. Many people teaching it in English studies have concentrated on using the strategies of creative writing, rhetoric, and composition studies because CNF is taught in those fields and those who teach it often have backgrounds in those fields (Fodrey, 2014). CNF being cross-disciplinary is confirmed by one of the key informants, *"Creative nonfiction appears to be the most queer and flexible of all genres. Its flexibility must always be part of the whole K-12 framework and it is important that the genre retains its flexible nature. We must not confine our students' writing and expression, after all, what they write is about themselves, and therefore all attitudes must be considered."*

Theme 2. Leveraging the pedagogical use of personal experiences

Almost all participants use personal experiences of learners to effectively teach CNF. Participants think that in order to produce creative nonfiction, students must draw on their personal truths and share them with others. Personal experiences, because they are actual stories, are pedagogically helpful in CNF, a genre that requires all facts and information to be based on truth and reality. Sharing personal experiences in the classroom, as one participant points out, is both compelling and heartwarming, *"I always advise them to write about their personal experiences from the heart because that is what people seek, honesty in your stories,"*

Another participant claims that incorporating personal experiences benefits not only the students who are able to write creative nonfiction, but also the teacher who may utilize these personal experiences to gain insight into her students' inner life. *"I'd get to know them better, and I'd understand how they feel." I learn about their daily lives and, as a result, I have a better understanding of their personal values through writing assignments. So, I guess that's one of the more effective things I've tried in class."* Because the genre is founded in reality, CNF has always been motivated by the personal, allowing students to focus their writing on an urgent and vital subject—themselves. When students actively participate in the writing process by developing a sense of personal attachment and, ideally, a personal investment in their work, they engage in a sort of metacognitive inquiry that can result in actual learning.

Two of the participants agree on the importance of this method in CNF teaching and learning. According to one participant, creative nonfiction is essentially about the self and life. *"CNF is about living. When I initially taught it, I thought it would be difficult because it was so personal; how can you write something so personal? What methods do you use to teach pupils to write about their personal experiences? 'How do you get pupils to talk about their personal lives?'"* The other important informant agrees, claiming that one aspect of Creative Nonfiction that makes it interesting but difficult to teach is its proximity to personal experiences and narratives, *"It's not easy. While you wanted them to narrate their personal experiences and views, it's also important that they do so creatively, considering that this type of nonfiction is anticipated by readers because it's so closely linked to the majority's personal experiences."*

Theme 3. Promoting Filipino Local Writers

Another technique used by participants is the usage of mentor texts, with a focus on promoting Filipino authors. A participant claims that she makes it a point to include mentor texts produced by Filipino authors in order to contextualize and relate the CNF subject to his students, who, sadly,

know more international authors than Filipino authors. *"I try to show them as many works by Filipino authors as I can. Because, unfortunately, students are more familiar with international literature than with Filipino authors. The goal of my CNF classes is to inspire students to become Filipino authors and readers. That is why it is vital to introduce pupils to Filipino writers as well as the context in which their works are written."*

Another participant expresses concern about the prevalence of foreign-authored reading materials and suggests that teachers read widely to provide useful reading resources for students. Another participant says she gets much of her reading from an item in the Philippine Daily Inquirer called Young Blood. She praises the reading materials for being of high quality and relevant to SHS students, noting, *"So I go to inquirer.com and look for articles about Young Blood that are simple to understand and relevant to them. I don't have any other grammar faults, and they weren't popular writers, but these are extremely good specialized pieces of writing."*

"I don't go back to the old literature, whether in English or Filipino, I don't include them in the reading list, more often than not, I look at new authors," says one participant, who employs selections from new authors rather than archaic writings produced by old writers. The majority of participants agree on the necessity of quality mentor texts in a CNF class and emphasize their efficacy, particularly when introducing different authors' writing styles, *"It is better that students study sample texts before engaging in writing tasks,"* one key source says. *I believe that no matter how hard they want to create anything, they will be unable to accomplish so unless they have read creative nonfiction samples."* Several academics agree with the participants' assessment of the value of mentor texts in training writing style. Mentor texts can be used in creative nonfiction classes to teach organization and style (Fodrey, 2014), as well as to demonstrate the author's voice and vision (Silverberg, 2019).

Recommendations

CNF teachers should begin to use a reflective-evaluative framework of assessment to investigate the impact of their strategies and classroom procedures on the learners in order to increase learners' agency and strengthen learners' identity as creative writers. The results of this assessment could help teachers decide how to proceed with the lessons and provide some insight into the learners' preferred and least favored activities. Because CNF is new in secondary school, this study does not necessarily advocate for standardization of practices and pedagogy, but it does urge greater definition of common words and practices in order to expand conversations about best practices in CNF, specifically in the SHS environment. Four broad areas are thus suggested to those who intend to replicate this study: (a) exploration of strategies for creative nonfiction subgenres; (b) best practices for specific student demographics, since this study only included teacher perceptions—this could take the form of studying student outcomes and identifying what pedagogy produces the "best" or "most successful" writers; and (c) exploration of a gendered pedagogy for creative nonfiction.

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