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Exploring the Academic/Creative Writing Binary

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Exploring the Academic/Creative Writing Binary

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Abstract

I began to work on this study in my ENG 201: Writing in the Disciplines class during my junior year at Pace University. After being asked to write a paper on what writing looks like in my discipline, I realized that my perceptions of the kinds of writing done by faculty and students in a university English department were limited and constricting as a result of the binary way in which I viewed academic and creative forms of writing. For instance, I had trouble believing that my creative writing professor studied pre-med in undergrad. I continued my research on this topic by developing a study to discover how faculty and undergraduates think about writing in an English department. In conducting this research, I hoped to redefine and illustrate potential overlaps between academic and creative writing and to propose new (perhaps more fluid or capacious) ways of labeling and conveying the kind of writing students and faculty produce. Specifically, I wanted to explore whether these are terms or categories that either groups use, or whether faculty and students' perceptions of academic and creative writing challenge these categories.

I explored these concepts through a qualitative study. After obtaining IRB approval, I devoted one class of Meaghan Brewer's English 201: Writing in the Disciplines to a workshop where students in the class brought in samples of their own writing and then put them into categories and created labels. Students filled out a form giving a rationale for how they labeled different kinds of writing before having a class discussion. I repeated the same process in a composition faculty meeting in the English department. These activities are modeled on activities described in research by composition scholar Anne Ruggles Gere. This highly

contextual, qualitative research is commonplace in composition studies and has been present in the majority of my initial literature review.

In conducting this study, my largest obstacle was the small amount of time I had to analyze the results of my activities between drafts. However, the data collected exceeded my expectations in that, like in much of the research cited in this paper, I found students had binary views of academic and creative writing despite not using them often as labels. For the most part, they described academic as being constricting and reliant on structure whereas they saw creative as a freer style that allowed them to voice an opinion. On the contrary, faculty used these terms more frequently, but thought about them in less binary ways. After having a group discussion, both faculty and students appeared to have broadened the way they looked at writing which is what I was hoping to encourage with this study. My findings suggest that faculty members need to create curricula that encourage students to see genres in more complex ways. Future research might explore how expanding the approach to teaching genre could redefine student perceptions of college writing.

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Introduction

In my junior year at Pace University, I took a creative writing course called “Advanced Writing: The Art of the Memoir” taught by Professor Bureen Ruffin. At first, the writing I

produced for this course felt drastically different than the papers I was submitting to my literature/rhetoric classes because the content was decided by me and I didn't think there was a right or wrong way to do it. However, Professor Ruffin went on to show the class that creative writing has rules and needs to be thought out and developed just as any other writing does. Having this line between writing styles blurred was my first step to seeing past the writing binary that exists within many university English Departments. The class was demanding and hard work which is not what I would've expected upon entering it.

At the same time, I was taking Professor Meaghan Brewer's honors section of "Writing in the Disciplines" in which we were assigned a paper asking us to explore what writing looks like within our major. I interviewed Professor Ruffin to get some quotes that I could put in my assignment, and it was during that process that I learned she majored in biology and was pre-med in her undergraduate years. In my mind, science and creative writing were so different that I couldn't imagine how she made that transition. However, Professor Ruffin explained that it wasn't as separate as most people would think. "Different types of writing have specifics in style, but we all have the same goals" Professor Ruffin explained. "We all want to convey something to our audience. You can write a lab report that is interesting. You can do that anywhere." She emphasized the importance of writing clearly, but also in a manner that is engaging. By these standards, formal college writing can be informal and personal at times so long as the information is still precise and accurate.

With my expectations of writing shattered, I concluded the indistinct lines between different kinds of writing would be an important and interesting topic that I could explore further in a study. Specifically, I designed a study of conceptions and attitudes towards creative and academic writing among college students of various majors and writing instructors in the English

department. In what follows, I present the results of this study. I argue that conventional English department curricula influence students to approach writing with the perception that “creative” and “academic” are binary terms that don’t work together. I also propose that there are ways faculty can help produce more permissive ways of thinking about writing.

Literature Review

The categorization of writing is something that scholars in fields like composition, education, and linguistics have been interested in for decades. In 1984, Carolyn R. Miller wrote about humanity’s craving for classification through categories we created called “genres” in “Genre as a Social Action.” In this article, Miller objects to lay definitions of genres which typically function as constraints upon new responses and thoughts (152). In doing so, she advocates for a more open rhetorical analysis of these categories and goes against interpretations of genre that are centered only the “substance or the form of discourse” (151) rather than “action it is used to accomplish” (151). Her work portrays genre as more than just a title for kinds of writing that have similar formal features. More recently, this approach to defining genre has been supported by Meaghan Brewer in her 2018 article “The Closer the Better? The Perils of an Exclusive Focus on Close Reading.” Brewer advocates that genres are “much more complex” than just “a kind of type text or category” (4). Similarly, Miller also describes how genres are a form of social motive, their classification based on the “joint rhetorical actions available at a given point in history and culture” (158). This means that genres can change depending on what is happening in the world around them. For instance, during the B.C era, poetry referred to epics such as Homer’s *Odyssey*. Today, it has evolved to include things like spoken word, slam poetry, and song lyrics. As time brings change to life and culture, genre will also be affected which is

why Miller sees it as more than a way to separate writing. Instead, she looks at genres through a rhetorical lens while still acknowledging the different rules and patterns that exist within them. Miller also notes that there is no “firm guidance on what constitutes a genre” (151). For instance, genres can be unconventional and used to describe anything such as board games, recipes, or rejection letters. Miller aims to introduce similar, flexible understandings of genre in order to classify writing more effectively. Thus, it has always been clear that different pieces of writing have noticeable similarities or trends in addition to inarguable differences.

However, there is much less certainty in regards to how we determine those qualities and to what extent genre characteristics affect the overall writing process. In my research on students' interpretations of genres, I have found evidence that they often interpret them through a binary lens. In her newly released book *Developing Writers in Higher Education: A Longitudinal Study*, Anne Ruggles Gere includes a chapter written by Lizzie Hutton and Gail Gibson which focuses on how students conceptualize different forms of writing, more specifically how they differentiate between “academic” and “creative” work rather than considering different metagenres or “ways of doing” (Hutton and Gibson 166) that could broaden how we look at the categorization of writing.

In the chapter, Hutton and Gibson provide examples in which students argue that understandings of writing are split into two vastly different and contradicting domains that do not have harmonious components. From the student perspective, academic writing is described as “very structured” (171) which is largely repetitive and requires them to “bar other forms of writerly identity” (174). Students associate writing for school with strict rules and formats that leave no room for the introduction of original voice or style. In other words, they believe that creative writing has no place in college writing classes. This belief causes students to view

creative writing as a kind of freestyle in which they don't have to follow a rubric or rules set by the teacher, which Hutton and Gibson view as actually introducing limitations.

The idea that academic and creative writing are inherently opposed is also addressed by Wendy Bishop in her article "When All Writing is Creative and Student Writing is Literature" in which she portrays students who think of creative writing as being done for fun, for the sake of personal interest and engagement, while academic writing is merely something that teachers require. Bishop does not deny that these categories exist nor that they can be a helpful asset in understanding writing. However, she admits that her methods for teaching both composition and creative writing classes are similar because she chooses to focus more on the writing process than the strict dos and don'ts of each genre. In doing so, she aims to convey that both kinds of courses "should allow you to explore writing beliefs, writing types (genres) and their attributes, and your own writing process" (229). Bishop uses her position as an educator to show that academic writing can be creative and vice versa. She argues that "we shouldn't assume that there is only one way to categorize or that those categories should (or could) hold fast for all people, in all cultures, in all historical times" (232). Here she reiterates Carolyn Miller's perspective that categories can be fluid and change depending on the overall context of writing.

Another complication to student views of different categories of writing is that students become reluctant to try new things in their work. Their hesitancy is largely a result of the fact that the outcome of doing something unfamiliar in the classroom could be literal academic failure and the fear often outweighs potential benefits that could arise from blurring the lines between binary categories of writing. Specifically, composition scholars demonstrate that students tend to believe that experimenting with their writing is too risky because they are graded based on the preferences and opinions of each individual professor. One student interviewed in

Hutton and Gibson's chapter described it as "In college, different professors want different things. Sometimes it's hard to anticipate that" (178). Lucille McCarthy also supports this student perspective in her article "A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing across the Curriculum." McCarthy conducted a study in which she followed one student named Dave throughout his classes for the first two years of college in order to collect data on the nature of writing processes in classrooms. From this, she was able to conclude that because writing standards vary so heavily with the discipline and instructor, writing in different college courses may often feel like "so many foreign countries" to a student (260). As a result, it was easy for Dave to be concerned with his ability to produce writing that would receive a good grade, a feeling which deters students from wanting to experiment or incorporate other learned factors into their writing process.

Another study that exemplifies students' hesitation to try new methods in writing classes is explored in a chapter from *Writing across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing* written by Kathleen Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak. Here, two students were asked to talk about their experiences with college writing. The first student, Emma, did not find her college writing courses helpful and instead used what she learned in high school to complete assignments. She was unable to identify new ways of writing. For her, everything fell into the strictly academic category in which all assignments were similar enough to be written the same way. The second student, Glen, was able to notice similarities and differences between the kinds of writing he was doing. He was able to apply techniques from different subgenres within academic writing such as a lab report and a humanities paper, but ultimately received a poor grade on his humanities paper due to the fact that the knowledge was not "appropriate to the new context" (Yancey et. al 80). Despite his effort to think outside of restrictive genre

boundaries, Glen was punished while Emma found success staying inside the lines. However, Glen learned how to write fluidly across disciplines which could be more significant than a grade in the long run. Although many instructors appear to want students to think in less rigid ways about genres or categories of writing, they commonly assign ambiguous papers without defining explicit criteria or providing examples in comparison to how genres exist in the real world. As a result, they may unknowingly reinforce these same binaries by only rewarding practices that align with traditional conventions of “academic” writing.

The student perception that writing in the classroom does not succeed with experimentation is consistently conveyed in Hutton and Gibson’s chapter. Students actively identify “academic” and “creative” as entirely separate categories, the former entailing learned competence and the latter entailing the development of writerly identity (169). Characteristics such as personal expression, thoughts and opinions, freedom of exploration, and safety in taking risks are what students identify as being strictly inappropriate for academic writing and necessary for creative. As a result, students tend to believe that academic writing can’t help them to grow as a writer or that creative writing can’t be meaningful or educational. They described writing creatively as being able to incorporate an original perspective in their writing that surpasses the “rigidly disciplinary categories they understood an ‘academic’ framework to require” (Hutton and Gibson 180).

The binary view of creative and academic writing has been built into students’ perspectives in part of the writing instruction they receive in classrooms. Faculty exert these same differing views as Eli Goldblatt explains with a personal anecdote in his article “Don’t Call it Expressivism: Legacies of a ‘Tacit Tradition’.” He tells the story of his time at a national conference of rhetoricians taking place shortly after the release of his literacy autobiography.

Rather than being congratulated on his success, Goldblatt is offended by his colleagues when the following remark is made: "We should write autobiographies. That would be easy and fun, wouldn't it?" (438). His "creative" work is degraded by being labeled as something that anyone could sit down and do when in reality, great creative work requires time and practice just as great academic work does. The differences between these two types of writing are perceived to be so drastic that they have influenced academic writing to be more valued in the academy, while creative writing is more valued outside of it.

Because writing is viewed and appreciated so differently in and outside of classrooms, most people do not even consider themselves writers despite it being something they do every day. Cydney Alexis elaborates on this in her article "Creative Writing is a Unique Category." She interviewed 48 people to get insight on how we use the identifying label of "writer." The majority of the people she talked to conducted various kinds of writing on a daily basis for their trade, whether that be in academia or a workplace setting. However, "when asked if they considered themselves writers, they resoundingly answered no" (188). This was heartbreaking for Alexis who advocates that writers are more than just people who create poems and stories which have become synonymous with "creative writing". However, despite the objection to being called "writers," people are less resistant to label themselves as readers as conveyed by Deborah Brant in "Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading." Brant also conducts interviews and finds that people "took pride in calling themselves an 'avid reader'" (468). However, writer is a harder identity to claim and is mostly claimed by creative writers, rather than those who produce academic writing (even though this form of writing is also creative). Still, in her discussions, people did not regard themselves as writers, despite one of them being a published poet.

The ways in which we categorize writing have made people, including students, reluctant to see past unyielding terms that define who they can be as writers. Even taking into account the dozens of essays, letters, and various writing tasks I complete each week, I still would not be willing to say that I am a writer. This is largely because “One sphere of writing is marked off as creative while others are devalued” (Alexis 188). These types of writing are viewed as so binary that people don't believe they can do both and still be valued as a writer. For example, the only teachers I have had that actively used that title to identify themselves or explain their occupation were professors who taught my creative writing classes despite the amount of knowledge I have acquired in my classes on literature or composition as well.

Notwithstanding the number of contradictions presented between academic and creative writing, there are many ways in which they collide. There are ways to view genre as more flexible categories that are open to influences from different kinds of content. One important factor in this expansion of genre analysis is the basis we hold for classifying writing. If writing is separated purely by content or form, it is likely that these genres will remain incompatible. In order for harmony to be achieved in the writing sphere, goals need to be the focus of classification rather than just “formal features or recurring patterns” (Gere 142). Evaluating writing in terms of purpose proved to have impressive results as described by Heather Lindenman in “Inventing Metagenres: How Four College Seniors Connect Writing Across Domains.” In the article, students categorize writing in regards to what they were intended to do such as “writing for a grade” vs “writing for money.” Some papers such as scholarship essays or grant applications were considered more academic in style but were written for personal reasons with a specific ambition in mind. This is an example of genre being a social action as proposed by Carolyn Miller. Students labeled the genres in terms of the surrounding context rather than in

terms of formulaic patterns that exist within the writing. In looking at writing this way instead of using form to determine what genre it can be, we create the opportunity for students to craft genuine writing that is composed from a variety of styles and characteristics.

As stated by Alexis, "It's time we banish the idea that certain writing forms are creative and certain aren't" (192). Having a binary view of writing has caused students and faculty to believe that certain types are better or more important than others. Additionally, it prevents them from utilizing both forms to their fullest potential because they are restricted by impressions that characteristics can't apply to more than one genre, such as the belief that talent is not needed to write academically (Alexis 189). If both students and professors can escape this mentality, there may finally be a true academic-creative hybrid.

In this paper, I aim to further explore the reasons that students and faculty give for differentiating between "academic" and "creative" writing. I also hope to consider other existing categories that are commonly used to identify writing in order to obtain a better understanding of how classification can be used to promote transparency in genre studies. Using the results from my research, I intend to encourage a more open thought process in regards to how writing is discussed and taught in university English departments. Below I outline my methods for achieving these goals.

Methods

In order to investigate binary classifications of writing, I conducted a study to analyze faculty and undergraduate students' perceptions of "academic writing" and "creative writing" in the context of an English department. These activities are modeled on activities described in

Lindenman's article (cited earlier) in which she follows four college students as they draw meta-generic connections across writing disciplines.

In conducting this research, I hoped to redefine and illustrate potential overlaps between these categories (academic and creative writing) or to propose new (perhaps more fluid or capacious) ways of labeling and conveying the kind of writing students and faculty produce. Specifically, I explored whether these are terms or categories that either group uses, or whether faculty and students' perceptions of academic and creative writing challenge these categories. After obtaining IRB approval for a qualitative research study, I devoted a class of Meaghan Brewer's English 201: Writing in the Disciplines to a workshop where students in the class brought in samples of their own writing and then put them into categories and created labels. Students filled out a form that I created giving a rationale for how they labeled different kinds of writing before we opened up to a class discussion. I repeated the same process in a composition faculty meeting in the English department. For this study, I asked the following questions:

1. What did you name your categories and which pieces of writing were placed in each?
You may write out your answer or display it with a table or bullet points.
2. How did you decide to make the categories that you did? Please explain your rationale for this process.
3. Did you struggle to fit any of your pieces of writing into a category? If so, which pieces of writing were more difficult to work with?

Following this initial segment, participants were provided with a second set of questions that more closely target the topic I am researching: academic and creative writing. These questions were:

1. Did you use the terms “academic” or “creative” writing to describe or categorize any of your writing? If not these exact words, did you use any similar terms?
2. After hearing these terms, would you make any changes to your original categories if given the chance? Explain your reasoning.
3. How would you explain the differences between academic and creative writing? Do you see them as useful categories for describing your work, and why or why not?

In asking these questions, I hoped to elicit data that would answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do students and faculty members use the terms “academic” and “creative” to describe and/or categorize their writing?
2. What other labels do students and faculty members use to describe and/or categorize their writing?
3. To what extent do students and faculty members see the terms “academic” and “creative” as adequate descriptors for their writing?

In the next section, I present my findings using these research questions as subcategories.

Findings and Discussion

Q1: To what extent do students and faculty members use the terms “academic” and “creative” to describe and/or categorize their writing?

Table 1 shows a separation of 18 student participants based on the ways in which they chose to categorize their writing. The first two labels depict students who used either “academic” and/or “creative” to label their work. The third label represents students who used terminology closely

resembling these two options. The last label portrays students who did not use these specific terms or interchangeable concepts.

Table 1: Student usage of “academic” and “creative” in writing categorization

	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Academic	3	16.7
Creative	1	5.6
Similar Terminology	8	44.4
Neither	7	38.9
n=18		

Of all the students involved in this study, only Madison¹ used both “academic” and “creative” for this activity. In her response, she said “When I was creating these categories, I realized that every piece of writing was different. I write academically, like my Diversity in Print essay, but I also write creatively, as seen in the poem. I didn’t see a lot of crossover between them.” Madison was also one of two English majors in the class and the only one taking a creative writing minor. Her experiences in a university English department did reinforce binary views between academic and creative writing. When asked if she would change her categories after the terms “academic” and “creative” were introduced, Madison replied “I probably would not change them. Using these two words came naturally as a way to separate the documents.”

¹ All participant names used are pseudonyms.

Madison, along with numerous other students, found it easy to label differences between academic and creative writing regardless of whether or not they used these terms to categorize their writing. Many of the students' descriptions closely aligned with the findings of Hutton and Gibson mentioned earlier. For example, the most common phrases associated with "academic" writing collected from the student data were:

- Informative
- Analytical
- Formal/Sophisticated
- Assignment/Rules
- Unpersonal [sic]
- Format/Citations

On the contrary, the terms that most commonly associated with "creative" writing were:

- Opinion
- Personal
- Freedom
- Imagination/Expression
- Pleasure/Fun/Hobby

Ultimately, students identified these terms as labels for different kinds of writing styles.

However, faculty participants were more inclined to think about the ways these labels are similar.

Table 2 shows a separation of 8 faculty participants from a composition faculty meeting based on the ways in which they chose to categorize their writing. The first two labels depict faculty who used "academic" and/or "creative" to label their work. The third label represents

faculty who used terminology closely resembling these two options. The last label portrays faculty who did not use these specific terms or interchangeable concepts.

Table 2: Faculty usage of “academic” and “creative” in writing categorization

	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Academic	3	37.5%
Creative	2	25%
Similar Terminology	2	25%
Neither	2	25%
n=8		

Faculty participants were particularly eager to debate the questions they were asked in this activity. While the majority of them did use one of the terms I was tracking, none used both terms together to classify their writing. This is largely because faculty saw all of the writing they did as creative even if completed in an academic setting. When asked to describe the differences between “academic” and “creative” writing, professor of Applied Linguistics Pete responded “Almost all academic writing can be creative, but not all creative writing is academic. I think people often use these terms to marginalize the ‘other’. Even academic writing is diverse and multidimensional. It differs by genre and discipline.” In this case, the participant was able to identify crossovers between the two labels rather than strictly listing the ways that they are

different. He followed by mentioning that “academic” and “creative” felt “too binary to distinguish between writing samples.”

Evidently, faculty seem to be much more aware of the writing binary than students are. Although they used the terminology more often, they thought of them differently and in less rigid ways than the students did in their responses. For instance, another composition faculty member Lisa said, “Academic writing is also beautifully written, which to me requires creativity.” Like most of the participants, Lisa was able to identify overlapping elements of creative and academic writing in her description.

Q2: What other labels do students and faculty members use to describe and/or categorize their writing?

Though only a few students used the exact terms “academic” and “creative” many of them shared a similar mentality with Rebecca who said, “I used historical and personal so that is basically academic and creative actually.” For those who used similar terminology, the common labels they created included:

- “formal” vs. “informal”
- “Informative/Research” vs. “Personal/Opinion”

In creating these categories, most of the students associated the first labels (formal/informative/research) with academic writing and the second labels (informal/personal/opinion) with creative writing. For instance, one student named Gabby created six different categories, two of which were “formal” and “informal”. In her rationale for how she determined which writing to put in these categories, she stated, “I was unsure about putting things in informal in general since they were all assignments, but chose to put the pieces

that were not based on actual research and were more creative writing pieces in it.” Because her writing was not research-based and felt more creative, Gabby chose to group it under “informal” whereas her other assignments done for class which did require research were grouped under “formal.”

Another example of a student who used terminology similar to “academic” and “creative” in binary ways is Samantha. During the activity, Sam created eight different categories for her writing, two of which were “Research Based” and “Personal Stance.” After I introduced academic and creative as potential labels, Sam wrote in her response that she would be likely to change her original categories if she could go back. She stated, “I probably would make changes to my original categories, and possibly call my research paper academic papers.” After placing her research work under “academic,” Sam also mentioned that she saw creative writing as very different and being more about personal ideas and opinions. As is evident from the two examples cited here, most students who used similar terminology viewed writing in binary ways to the same extent that students who used “academic” or “creative” did.

For those who did not use either term or corresponding categories, the labels were very specific and varied depending on the samples that the students brought in for the activity and their discipline. For example, Kate, an economics and art major, brought in various materials from a group project, a painting, and papers that she wrote for a literature class. When creating her categories, Kate did not want to use “creative” because she felt that her work wasn’t self-driven because it was assigned to her. She also didn’t want to use “academic” because it was “too broad of a category. It doesn’t account for all of the different disciplines; econ vs art vs English etc.” As a result, her labels ended up being designed specifically to fit with each individual piece of writing. Her final response was:

- Business Proposal- American Apparel marketing proposal, Stand Up Stand Strong event proposal
- Analytical Response to Literature- A (Step)Mother's Love
- Art- Willie Nelson painting
- Fiction- The Bad Curse
- Data Analysis- What Affects College Enrollment?

While Kate considered all of these to be academic forms of writing that she did for school, she broke them down into categories that more elaborately represented what the writing was intended for. Her labels more closely resemble authentic genres than they do macrogenres like “academic” and “creative,” genres containing several simpler genres.

Nearly every student took a similar approach in that they categorized their writing based on what it was used for, even if they did use the terms I was tracking. Other common labels that I came across were:

- Research
- Literature/Reading Response
- Persuasive Essay
- Speech

Faculty participants provided a lot more diversity in their writing samples than the students did. As a result, there were many labels created that students did not mention such as:

- Tweets
- Agendas/Note to Self
- My stuff

These categories were not mentioned in any student responses which may be a result of the differences in ways that faculty and students define writing. For example, while many of the students wrote on their activity forms that they don't do any writing outside of school, they were neglecting to label their everyday activities as writing. Texting, emailing, making captions for Instagram, writing tweets, making to-do lists, and other various tasks did not cross students' minds as options for writing samples for this activity. However, faculty seemed to have more inclusive understandings of writing as many of them brought in samples that were written outside of the academy such as social media posts and emails. The majority of professors also created a category containing class materials such as lesson plans and a category containing work they have had published in scholarly journals, which was different from what the students provided.

Faculty also proved to have more fluid conceptions of the labels that they applied to writing as they often put the same piece in numerous different categories. Students created a larger number of categories and rarely put more than one or two samples in each whereas faculty typically created fewer categories but placed their samples in overlapping areas. From these initial labeling responses, it is clear that faculty had less hesitancy to recognize writing as belonging to multiple different groups or genres such as "academic" and "creative."

Q3: To what extent do students and faculty members see the terms "academic" and "creative" as adequate descriptors for their writing?

Despite more than half of the students identifying "academic," "creative," or similar labels as useful ways to categorize writing in general, all but a few commented on the fact that they felt these terms didn't apply to them because all of their writing was academic. This study

showed that students report doing very little self-sponsored writing outside of the classroom which made them reluctant to use the term “creative.” Even when they were given opportunities to be creative with their assignments, they felt that they still were not allowed to write freely because it was done for school which meant students felt compelled to follow rules and guidelines that they could be graded on. Rather than labeling their work as “creative,” students opted to focus on different breakdowns of “academic” to categorize their writing.

On the other hand, faculty were avidly against these terms as labels. In the discussion after the activity, the participants agreed that they felt the work they do for academia is still original and should be considered creative. For instance, one professor wrote, “I also think that scholarly/academic work is inherently creative in the sense that it requires constructing a story that someone will understand and be able to follow - these goals require creativity of the writer.” Unlike students, faculty felt that there was still room to be creative when writing within an academic institution. When prompted to debate whether or not “academic” and “creative” could be useful for categorizing his writing, another professor, Brian, whose disciplines are writing pedagogy and narrative nonfiction stated that he thought these categories were:

Not useful at all. In fact, I see them as harmful. “Creative” can’t have substance and “academic” can’t be enjoyable to read or have narrative? Nah... So I would explain the difference as a reductive mega-genre classification that points out the flaws in overemphasizing categories or genre names.

As can be seen from Brian’s response, faculty generally felt that relying on labels such as “academic” and “creative” to represent writing is vastly problematic. Brian is a professor of both creative writing and first-year composition courses but still felt that the writing in both areas should be valued equally. Like most members of the faculty, Brian was resentful of these terms

as binary labels and seemed offended by the notion that his scholarly work couldn't also be viewed as creative and vice versa.

Students did not show such passionate rejections of “academic” and “creative” as categories because they did not identify as writers of both genres. With the exception of Madison who was the only student from my activity who studied creative writing as a part of her discipline, students did not typically see themselves as creative writers because they narrowed their focus to writing assignments they had done for class.

Summary and Conclusion

Faculty did not hesitate to point out issues with the writing binary, but it was a larger challenge for students to make that leap. However, it is not because students are incapable of recognizing the problems that arise from using academic and creative as contradicting terms for labeling writing. For instance, toward the end of the class discussion, one student, Jacob, shared:

I think the only difference between academic and creative writing is the style. A narrative/story and a research paper can get the same ideas across but in radically different ways. I do not necessarily think these are useful categories, because the language implies that there is a dichotomy between creativity and academia, when, in my opinion, creativity and academia exist more as a spectrum of writing.

Jacob was able to understand that there was a binary between academic and creative writing which allowed him to begin challenging it. He felt that while much of his “academic” writing contained creative elements, none of them were strictly creative and vice versa because they shared certain features such as the fact that both forms can still be intelligent or original.

Many other students agreed with the sentiment that different kinds of writing can share characteristics, but were still hesitant to use “academic” and “creative” as terms that are not complete opposites as a result of the strict writing guidelines they felt existed in college classrooms. For example, in the open discussion after the activity, numerous students expressed the feeling that school takes creativity out of things that could be creative otherwise because they feel obligated to write in certain ways to please their professors. Most students didn't associate any of their schoolwork with “creative” writing because they felt too much pressure when completing these assignments in comparison to the carefree and fun writing they envisioned as being creative. One student went so far as to say creative writing doesn't describe her own work because to her, creative writing “doesn't have a purpose.” In other words, she viewed creative writers as not having real intentions with their writing. However, when writing academically, students have an agenda to please their professors.

Despite having their own opinions, students talked about their reluctance to voice their thoughts in school writing assignments because they have repeatedly been asked to show evidence to support their arguments rather than just belief. This strict, factual format that students try to maintain has prevented them from feeling that “creative” is an appropriate way to describe their writing because it's not full of the thoughts and opinions they have, but rather quotes and citations from other sources who have more credibility. The issue with these students' perceptions is that they fail to see the opportunity to showcase both factual evidence and personal opinion in their writing or to use that evidence in a way that supports claims of their own. Students can understand shared characteristics of creativity and academia, but do not feel comfortable implementing such qualities in their writing assignments because they don't feel it fits into the “academic” writing box. If these obstacles are to be overcome, it is important that we

continue to analyze ideas about writing in addition to making attempts to shed light on the problematic nature of the “academic” and “creative” writing binary.

As a result of this study, it is evident that students could benefit from a more open-minded approach to writing. One way that faculty can help make this a reality is by facilitating more discussions about genre. In Professor Brewer’s class, Madison was the only student who had taken a class on genre and as a result, she was able to conceptualize categories as more than just mystery or romance by suggesting unique labels such as “board games.” Another example of how professors can facilitate more open-minded perceptions of genre is by creating activities that demonstrate atypical examples of categories and labels that can be attributed to writing. For example, in her Composition Theory and Practice class, ENG 302, Professor Brewer put a few pieces of writing up on the projector and asked her students to speculate what genres they could fall under. Rather than using familiar labels like “fiction”, the students had to think about a variety of different ways they could classify something. An example of a genre that came from this activity was “rejection letter.” If faculty can encourage students to look beyond the traditional binaries of writing that they cling to, students will be more appreciative of different writing styles and willing to take risks which could help them to improve as writers in and outside of their disciplines.

In addition to having more discussions and activities about genres in class, faculty can also make attempts to assign students to write and read authentic genres rather than what Elizabeth Wardle refers to as “mutt genres” in her article “Mutt Genres and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University?” According to Warlde, mutt genres are “genres that do not respond to rhetorical situations requiring communication in order to accomplish a purpose that is meaningful to the author” (777). In other words, assignments that

are given and expected to be written one certain way don't contribute to a student's overall ability to write across disciplines in different styles. These assignments are genres that don't exist in the real world outside of the classroom and are more like "tests" than meaningful pieces of writing.

Instead, Wardle suggests that professors give writing assignments that can be fluid and interpreted in many ways like genres are in real life. She states that doing so can help give students the "power and authority to change academic genres to better meet their needs" (783). In the responses during my activity with students, very few of them felt that they had enough control to alter the genre they were writing in to be more suitable such as how one student mentioned not being able to write more creatively because that's how computer science writing worked. Wardle argues that instructors shouldn't teach such fixed genres to students as doing so can overlook ways in which writing changes and adapts in everyday life. She wrote:

Simply teaching the institutionalized features of a genre to students also ignores the complex reasons why that genre evolved into what it is, and the myriad reasons it may (and almost certainly will) continue to change. As people work within different activity systems, they "learn to ... manage genres in complex and specific ways" (Kain and Wardle 115). They implicitly understand that certain genre features would not be effective in response to a specific exigence.

Essentially, Wardle advocates that the best way to go about teaching genre is to teach them authentically and not as categories that only praise certain elements of writing which can never change. Real genres can be shaped by the context they are presented in and by the author's intention in using them. In order for students to feel more comfortable addressing the binary between "academic" and "creative" writing, they should be exposed to ways in which those

labels can expand and overlap in different scenarios. By encouraging students to transfer characteristics of writing across genres and disciplines rather than teaching genres as strict categories with constant features, faculty could help to create a less binary approach to writing in university English departments.

Appendix 1: Consent Form

Project Title: : *Exploring the Academic/Creative Writing Binary*

Undergraduate Student Investigator's Name: Jessica O'Leary_____

Department: English, undergraduate student

Email: *jo89220n@pace.edu*

Principal Investigator: Meaghan Brewer, Assistant Professor

Department: English

Email: *mbrewer2@pace.edu*

The study investigators are currently engaged in a study of the different ways in which people categorize writing.

To help the study investigators gain further insights into this area, I will be asked to:

- 1) Bring in samples of my writing to a class/faculty meeting
- 2) Participate in an activity in which I separate my writing into categories of my choice
- 3) Allow the researchers to analyze my results and use them to draw conclusions about writing

All of the observations, class activities, and pieces of writing will be required of all participants.

All documents and information pertaining to this research study will be kept confidential, unless required by applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations to be disclosed. I understand that records and data generated by the study may be reviewed by Pace University and its agents, the study sponsor or the sponsor's agents (if applicable), and/or governmental agencies to assure proper conduct of the study and compliance with regulations. I understand that the results of this study may be published. If any data is published, I will not be identified by name.

Questions about the research project are welcomed at any time. My participation in this study is on voluntary basis, and I may refuse to participate at any time without consequence or prejudice.

Consent Form p. 2 of 2

If I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Institutional Review Board Coordinator at (212) 346-1153. The IRB Coordinator may also be reached by email: paceirb@pace.edu

Signing my name below indicates that I have read and understand the contents of this Consent Form and that I agree to take part in this study.

Project Title: : *Exploring the Academic/Creative Writing Binary*

Undergraduate Student Investigator's Name: Jessica O'Leary _____

Department: English, undergraduate student

Email: jo89220n@pace.edu

Principal Investigator: Meaghan Brewer, Assistant Professor

Department: English

Email: mbrewer2@pace.edu

Participant's Name (please print):

Participant's Signature Date

Undergraduate Student Investigator's Signature Date

Principal Investigator's Signature Date

Appendix 2: Activity Form

Instructions: For this activity, you were asked to bring in 5 samples of your writing. Take some time to think about the ways in which you could split these writings into categories. You can put one piece of writing in more than one category, but try to give them all labels or groupings. After you've done that, please fill out the following form.

1. What did you name your categories and which writings were placed in each? You may write out your answer or display it with a table or bullet points.

2. Why did you decide to make the categories that you did? Please explain your rationale for this process.

3. Did you struggle to fit any of your writings into a category? If so, which writings were more difficult to work with?

***SEPARATE FORM* - Participants would not receive this form until they had completed and submitted the one above.**

Instructions: Please answer the following questions.

1. Did you use the terms “academic” or “creative” writing to describe or categorize any of your writings? If not these exact words, did you use any similar terms?

2. After hearing these terms, would you make any changes to your original categories if given the chance?

3. How would you explain the differences between academic and creative writing?

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