

Flickers of Hidden Meaning – Braiding Essays as Creative Experience for Academic Writers

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Abstract

In creative nonfiction, the genre of the braided essay is common. This creative art of braiding different strands and outside voices might also be liberating for academic writers as an expansion of academic writing that allows hidden meaning to shine through. This teaching practice paper shares how this genre was used for writing about teaching practice at EATAW 2021. It introduces the genre of the braided essay and uses the steps of the EATAW workshop as an example of how to teach it.

Introduction

This teaching practice paper introduces academic writing instructors to a technique commonly employed in creative writing. Many writers have found it beneficial to draw insights from the realm of creative writing to enhance their academic writing skills. For instance, McVey (2008) contends that all writing possesses a creative dimension, while Goldsmith (2017) illustrates how even the act of copying texts involves creative decision-making. Antoniou and Moriarty (2008) identify various aspects of teaching creative writing that could enrich the instruction of academic writing, emphasizing motivational elements and community-building in the classroom. Yoo (2017) shares her struggles in navigating the dual identities of an academic and creative writer. She explores numerous instances of writers who incorporate reflections on their creative processes into their academic writing, citing familiar names within the EATAW community, such as Donald Murray and Graham Badley. Additionally, there are concepts within artistic research that leverage art, particularly literature and poetry, as a means of research. These approaches aim at knowledge production through creative writing (Caduff, 2019).

Yoo (2021, p. 74) describes how creative writing techniques might help “to capture flickers of hidden meaning”. This kind of “hidden meaning” is something I find especially appealing in creative writing. Whereas in academic writing everything has to be precise and clear, the value of creative writing sometimes lies especially in what is not expressed clearly and leaves room for resonance and interpretation. This is something I rediscovered upon returning to teaching creative writing after many years as an instructor of academic writing. This rediscovery formed my answer to the EATAW 2021 conference topic, which included the question: “What has changed recently?” For me, after a change of institutions, what had changed was the explicit permission, and the encouragement to not write explicitly, to leave room for hidden meaning and to explore with students how to do this. I think that this kind of writing experience can be useful for academic writers, too. Writing creatively can help academic writers to explore those ideas and connections that a researcher is not able to see clearly yet. As Yoo (2021) puts it: “Our journey through the academic writing process often follows an unknown path. Along this journey we may glimpse flickers of hidden meaning that present an opportunity for learning” (p. 82).

Exploring hidden meanings presents a valuable learning opportunity for both students and researchers. It is widely acknowledged that academic research should remain receptive to unexpected outcomes. Thus, researchers need to embrace the unanticipated and the surprising. To do that, they need to deal with ambiguous and vague ideas. Yet, how do we teach this to students? We hardly ever think that academic writing classes are the place for this because we are busy teaching how to meet style, genre and audience requirements; how to express arguments clearly and convincingly and, last but not least, correctly. Nevertheless, writing itself can be a rich avenue for unraveling hidden meanings, allowing for exploration and utilization as a valuable learning experience. And creative writing offers many techniques for this. One of these techniques is the braided essay. Since I found it fascinating as well as easy to work with, I decided to offer a workshop on this technique at EATAW 2021, with teachers of academic writing as participants in mind. I chose to focus on creative nonfiction, because the topic questions of the conference call for papers invited this approach, asking “Who are we? Where do we work? What has changed recently?” (EATAW, 2021).

Braiding Technique and Braided Essays

Braiding as a literary technique is common in fiction. In novels, it is usually employed to create tension. For example, the story may be interrupted by a change in perspective or storyline (as explained by Sol Stein (1995) in his famous text *On Writing*). Unlike fiction, creative nonfiction tells a true story, rooted in the author's personal experiences, infused with literary techniques typically associated with fiction. In creative nonfiction, the braiding technique may also produce tension, but more importantly, it is a way to keep the audience engaged by opening up new meanings. The technique has become popular in the braided essay genre (Fitzgerald, 2013; Miller & Paola, 2019; Walker, 2017a). As Miller and Paola (2019, p.126) put it, a braided essay is defined by its braided form:

In this form, you fragment your essay into separate strands that repeat and continue throughout the essay. There is a sense of weaving about it – of interruption and continuation – like the braiding of bread, or of hair.

Miller and Paola (2019, p. 127) recommend a special procedure by suggesting that writers add a strand of text or text fragment that is not personal. They call those strands “outside voices”, suggesting that “When you write a braided essay, find at least one outside voice that will shadow your own; in this way the essay gains texture and substance”.

As the use of “shadow” suggests, these outside voices do not have to be obviously contextual for the other strands of the essay. They are meant to open up gaps and to provide resonance to personal experiences: “You must expand your peripheral vision, focusing on images that at first seemed oblique to the stories. The braided form also allows a way for research and outside voices to intertwine with your own voice and experience” (Fitzgerald, 2013).

To get a sense of the form, Nicole Walker (2017b) suggests some examples for braided essays to read: <https://nikwalk.com/2017/09/15/braided-essays/> [last accessed August 3rd, 2023]. Zining Mok also takes a closer look at braided essay examples and how they work: <https://writers.com/braided-essays> [last accessed August 3rd, 2023].

There are also instances of book-length fiction employing braiding in the form of braided essays. For instance, Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2001) interweaves fictional newspaper clippings, while Theresia Enzensberger's *Auf See* (2022) incorporates excerpts from a fictional “Archive” into her narrative. Enzensberger uses this technique to narrate stories about nonfictional historical utopian states.

In my creative writing classes, I have experienced that researching for context and working it into personal experiences not as reference, but as textual context, opened up new meanings, and new ways to understanding texts. For example, one student wrote an essay about her experiences with loneliness living in strange cities like Dubai and New York City and about the difficulties of becoming a musician. She wove in citations from well-known singers about their experiences of becoming famous. Upon reflection, she claimed that this process assisted her

in adopting a different perspective for the essay—one centered on compassion for others rather than a solitary viewpoint. Additionally, a colleague from my writing collective wrote about a failed love and connected it with a piece of research on gated communities; research that was connected to a totally different project she was working on as a teacher. In her essay, the different strands interact with each other in a way that made me struggle as a reader at first, because I did not immediately understand the connections. Nevertheless, at the same time a meaning flickered through, because the loved person seemed to be inaccessible, like a gated community is inaccessible for non-residents. In the end, she made this connection more explicit: “YOU are abandoned, untraceable. Gated Loneliness. That’s how you call this object” (Herzog, 2021, p. 200. My translation).

These examples demonstrate the freedom that creative writing allows. Writers do not necessarily have to write explicitly and precise, but can play with the untold and deliberately leave room for the interpretation of readers. And braiding seems to enhance these rooms for interpretation in an artistic way. Mok (2023) stresses this point by stating:

The best braided essays, however, unfold associatively, even ambiguously. While coherence is important, making the links between the various threads too neat or too obvious can make an essay feel contrived and boring. When writing a braided essay, it’s always good to remember: Your reader is often smarter than you think!

In the same way, Walker (2017a) argues that the untold or not explicitly told aims at readers’ intelligence and engagement, fostering surprise and resisting easy answers:

I think meaning often lies in what F. Scott Fitzgerald called ‘first-rate intelligence’: the ability to hold two opposing ideas in your mind at the same time. The tension between two unlike things working against each other does, with enough stress and repetition, press out meaning. [...] The process of pulling together two disparate ideas allows for surprise. [...] The braided form is one of resistance. The further apart the threads of the braid, the more the essay resists easy substitutions and answers.

On the other hand, Williams (2021) argues that braiding only works when you braid something in that fits in a braid; thus, the braiding in her opinion should neither be too arbitrary nor too obvious.

Writing a braided essay, then, consists of writing different strands loosely connected to a topic and finding a text or different text fragments that somehow resonate with this topic, even when the matter is a different one. The last step is to braid the strands. At EATAW2021 we tried these steps only briefly, due to time restrictions. I will introduce them here, to give a picture and will afterwards follow up with some further reflections on this technique.

Workshopping Braided Essays on Being a Teacher of Academic Writing

As noted, the workshop at EATAW 2021 followed the conference questions: “Who are we? Where do we work? What has changed recently?” I used each of the questions to let the participants produce one strand of the braided essay.

The first step was to write about who we are as teachers. I asked the participants to think about us as teachers and to try to recall scenes of our teaching lives. These could be difficult situations, everyday situations, rewarding situations or whatever came to mind. To make this task more accessible, I recommended using the magic formula “I remember”. This anaphora is used by many creative writers, including Brainard (2001) and Ruge (2014) and works well for evoking memories.

Participants were first asked to initiate each paragraph with the phrase “I remember” and aim to compose at least five to seven paragraphs. This approach encourages writers to delve deeply into a specific memory, providing an opportunity to articulate additional details in each paragraph. Simultaneously, it allows for the conjuring of distinct situations with the commencement of each new paragraph.

The second step was dedicated to the question “Where do we work?” I asked the participants to pick an ordinary object that sits in the room they work in. I knew that in pandemic times most participants would be at home, but encouraged them to also think back to their office or to the times when they were actually teaching in a real classroom. Using objects as a metaphor is another creative writing technique that helps to stir hidden meaning. An object “creates a tangible link to abstract feelings, and it provides enough distance from the writer that he or she doesn’t come across as whiny” (Margara, 2014). In this case, the use of the object was less metaphorical, as participants were asked to let this object talk directly about themselves at their workplace. The object should be a good observer. It could tell what participants usually do, how they usually react and also could give an impression of the location and/or institution. Here is an example of a beginning:

I am the yellow tin can sitting on Katrin’s desk, storing paperclips, rubber bands, business cards and other hodgepodge. These days, she sits at her desk from early morning until late, surrounded by two laptops and a screen, talking in her headset for hours. Many eyes stare into our cozy study room here. But not many see her as I can see her...

The third step was dedicated to the question of what had changed recently. Since we were writing about us as teachers, this strand was meant to look at the institutional side of teaching. I asked the participants to go through their e-mails or their institutions’ homepages, skimming the endless amount of new rules, policies and recommendations we all received daily in these times due to the uncertain situation and the constantly changing governmental regulations. I asked them to pick one random text of those announcements that somehow affects their teaching. It could also be a mission statement, a complaint or an official message.

With these three texts, the fourth step was to cut them into pieces and braid them. It was up to the participants to actually print, cut and glue them or to do it digitally. I recommended to not change the linear order of the single strands, but to feel free to cut wherever they wanted. Participants were also allowed to add or rewrite smaller parts.

We shared the braided texts in breakout-sessions and afterwards discussed the experience. The main feedback was how surprised people were about new emotions, interpretations and meanings that resulted from braiding the texts. Although we did not have much time for writing, participants stressed that it was very helpful to really try the technique, because otherwise they would not have believed the effect of braiding their writing.

Braided Essays in Academic Writing Classes

Workshop participants at EATAW2021 suggested that using the technique in academic writing classes and with doctoral students might foster new insights for students and enhance motivation. As pointed out above, my main purpose for using it is to explore hidden meaning. This kind of writing gives us a chance to find meaning that we were not aware of. It triggers our brains in ways many creativity techniques do, like, for example, the “oblique strategies”, a set of over 100 prompts, which all suggest an action or a way of thinking to assist in creative situations. The prompts were created by musician Brian Eno and multimedia artist Peter Schmidt and aim at interrupting the obvious to create room for the unexplored (Taylor, 1997).

Creativity is undeniably essential in academia and for every research project. Nevertheless, the act of teaching creativity appears to be met with even more skepticism than teaching writing, and it may find even less space in the curricula of our institutions, aside from within art education. So why not combine both, teaching creativity and teaching writing? They come as a wonderful couple and the braided essay offers an easy to open door.

Returning to the question, “What changed recently?”, another hidden meaning might open up when inviting creative writing to the academic writing classrooms. Due to the dramatic changes in the teaching landscape of academic writing, prompted by recent advancements in large language models, commonly known as Artificial Intelligence, there is a pressing need to reconsider the reasons, methods, and content of our instruction in academic writing. I have stated above that as teachers of academic writing we are often occupied with matters of style, audience awareness and correctness. Machines can change style and write the same content for different purposes in one click, always in the appropriate and correct language. By now, other questions become more urgent: How can we help our students develop critical thinking when the hard work of thinking through writing is supposedly done by machines? And why should they even learn academic writing when machines seem to do a better job – at least with regard to surface issues? And on an institutional level: How can we know that the student texts we grade are authored by them?

Creative writing in academic writing classrooms might be able to provide new ways of dealing with these problems. A braided essay has its starting point in personal memories and reflections. This is something that can motivate students to write; something that they might consider worth writing on their own. It is also a form of writing that can incorporate research. This research could of course be deeper than the random picking we did during the conference workshop and could be accompanied in class. For dealing with time restrictions, it can be helpful to write one strand at a time over the time span of several classes. Teachers could introduce creative techniques like the ones I introduced at the EATAW2021 workshop and ask students to follow-up with those exercises at home in more depth. Using those techniques could be followed-up by a reflection in class, because both techniques (the iteration of “I remember” as well as letting an object take the outside view) might be helpful for academic writing processes as well. “I remember”, for example, could be a very simple way to recall knowledge about a subject or a field. Changing the perspective (as in taking the point of view of an object) can help to get distance and to gain new perceptions. Why not ask the desk lamp its opinion on the thesis topic?

Doing the braiding might also be useful for getting a new understanding of the power of revision. We know that students tend to understand revision as something that is done at surface level (Sommers, 1994). The task of combining different texts or fragments can help them understand how changes in structure and combining paragraphs differently can lead to significantly new meanings. For doing this kind of braiding, I recommend printing all strands and using glue and scissors, because this experience could help students to get a new sense of how writing is also a handcraft.

All these elements can serve as justifications for incorporating creative writing into academic writing classrooms—if, indeed, justification is needed. Alternatively, I aim to present this teaching practice paper as an encouragement to embrace recent and forthcoming changes as a window of opportunity to experiment with new and creative approaches to writing. I assert that in doing so, we will not only uncover hidden meanings but also assist students in recognizing the inherent power of writing. We should offer the power of writing as a gift to our students, a power that no machines should ever steal away from them.

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