

Middle School Creative Writing Peer Critiques in Blended Learning

Institutional Context: I am preparing this module for a 7th grade creative writing class [REDACTED] [REDACTED] is a private, co-educational, college preparatory PreK-12 school in which academic rigor is prized. This course is a 12-week course that all students in the seventh grade will complete during one of three rotations during the course of the school year. [REDACTED] I am solely responsible for the course for the upcoming school year, and I have freedom to keep, discard, or edit any parts of the course as it was taught by the previous instructor.

My Prior Experience Teaching Creative Writing: I have taught this course several times in the public high school where I taught from January 2001 until the last day of school this year. My new experience will be vastly different for several reasons. When I taught this course in the past, the course was a year long elective as opposed to the 12-week course for which I am preparing. I will be teaching classes of all seventh grade students who all have the same English teacher. Horizontal and vertical teaming will be easy, and I will be able to coordinate lesson objectives with the students' needs as expressed by their teachers. In my previous experience, the class was comprised on students in grades nine through twelve in a school with 3,600 students. There was no possibility of horizontal or vertical teaming. The seventh grade at my new school has only 130 students. Furthermore, when I taught this course in the past, access to technology was an obstacle towards integrating technology. In my new school, students are required to bring their own laptops and the buildings are wireless.

In the past, I was not nearly as effective teaching this course as I would have liked. A major factor is that a course like creative writing presupposes that students enrolled will enjoy, or

at least tolerate, writing. In my old school, half of the students were avid readers and writers while the other half were placed into the course by guidance counselors who had no other open seats. As a result, half of my students generally “hated” writing – even the free writing journal prompts were “asking too much.” It was a very challenging undertaking. My ideal, at the time, was to use existing literature and creative daily journal prompts as jumping off points for specific assignments, which ranged from writing imitations (e.g. write your own version of “The Red Wheelbarrow”) to writing stories to answer creative scenarios (e.g. Explain why a character has stolen this trophy.). The course was entirely face-to-face with extremely limited technological integration. From start to finish, the course consisted of mini-units each of which focused on one specific aspect or form of writing (i.e. word choice, writing poems about nature, short stories in first person, dialogue, etc.). In the end, we created a literary magazine that was nearly entirely comprised of pieces by students in the creative writing classes. Additionally, in a previous graduate school course, *Designing and Delivering Online Content*, I chose to design a creative writing courseⁱ. I envisioned this course to be a year-long course like the class I taught before.

Learners: This will be my first year teaching middle school, as well as my first year teaching private school. I have had one prior encounter with a representative group of students during my interview process for the job. I have discussed the students’ levels, prior experience, etc. to some extent with other teachers at the school in preparation for accepting and subsequently preparing for the job. The students are highly motivated to succeed academically. They tend to look forward to this class because it is considered to be a fun elective. Due to the nature of this school, I can expect all the students to be reading at or above grade level with nearly no exceptions. In their sixth grade Language Arts course, students are introduced to creative writing, but for most

of these students who have attended the school since Pre-K, this will be their first encounter with structured creative writing. My last seven years of teaching have been teaching ninth grade students who are at the end of early adolescence and the beginning of young adulthood. I am fairly comfortable with the nuances of this age group.

Course Overview: My plan is to blend the entire course and treat it as a writing workshop. The ultimate goal will be a small writing portfolio for each student with four or five pieces each at the end of the 12-week course. For this project, I am going to detail one unit of the course, which will be the students' first experience with peer editing and critique as part of the writing process.

Background: Before this lesson, students will submit their first complete writing piece demonstrating the power of imagery in writing, to the LMS. This will be the first "major" writing assignment. (Journals are not considered major writing pieces but can serve as inspirations for required pieces later.) In order to develop student comfort levels with the blended course, I will have already organized some regular online activities involving "found poetry," "words of the week," and regular journal assignments so that students will have previously interacted online.

Unit Objective: At the end of this lesson, students will be able to respond critically to three other classmates' descriptive writing by analyzing their peers' writing and use of imagery with constructive, detailed, specific commentary and utilizing the teacher-created rubric as a guide.

Enabling Objectives: 1. identify imagery in published writing; 2. discuss the impact of imagery using examples; 3. write poetry and prose using imagery.

The Blended Unit Plan

On the following pages, I first introduce the basic idea of how I will blend the content of the course as a whole. Then, I outline the specific unit I will complete for this project.

General Overview of Blended Learning for Middle School Creative Writing Course	
<i>Face to Face</i>	<i>Online</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I will teach all lessons and content face to face with a variety of activities including class discussions, small group work, etc. ▪ Teacher-student writing conferences to review assignments and discuss revisions. ▪ Student writing workshops for completing assignments. ▪ Editing final drafts for grammar and conventions to prepare for publication. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students will maintain their journals online using a journal feature in the LMS or a password-protected blog. ▪ Peer reviews and critiques. ▪ Student vocabulary and poetry discovery activities. ▪ Final presentation/publication of writing portfolio through personal blogs/webpages or other desktop publishing.

Unit Outline

In the following section, I outline each activity of the blended unit. Beneath each activity, I include my rationales for the activity; rationales include my *justifications based on research* and my teaching experience. I also explain my choices for *technology* within the rationale section.

IMAGERY FOR IMPACT: A UNIT OVERVIEW	
<i>Activity</i>	<i>Method for Instruction</i>
<p>“Oranges” <u>Students</u>: For homework, students will read the poem “Oranges” by Gary Soto and watch a short video on the poem. Students will have no prior knowledge as to the purpose for this</p>	<p>Online: Both the text for the poem and the video will be available</p>

assignment.

online.

Rationales: Combining the text-based poem with the video will build interest in the subject as students try to answer the question: *Besides oranges what are some of the most memorable images created by Soto (the poet) in his poem? If you had to list single words describing the poem and/or its content, what would three of these words be? What is this poet’s strength as a writer?* According to Keller’s ARCS Model, introducing the unit in this manner helps build motivation in two ways. First, by posing a question that has no right or wrong answer as an introduction, students can build confidence prior to beginning the lesson. Second, this is an attention getting strategy to which Keller refers as the “inquiry arousal” (Keller, 1987, p.5; Keller, 2010, p.47). In addition, Garrison and Vaughan suggest including an activity called a “Concept Reflection Assignment” as a “prelecture” activity to help students focus on what they do not know and want to know. The following class activity will be about imagery and appealing to the senses, abundant in this poem (2008, p. 133). The poem “Oranges” is a great introductory poem for this lesson for reasons in addition to Soto’s eloquent use of imagery: the narrator is a twelve-year-old boy much like my students will be; the poem is written at their reading level and does not include any challenging vocabulary or sentence structures; the figurative language is basic. Therefore, the students will be able to relate to the content and comprehend the poem so that issues such as vocabulary and comprehension will not create obstacles to our investigation of imagery as presented in this piece. Beginning this unit with an independent, inquiry-based activity that is completed online at home helps prepare students for a robust face-to-face session the following day. Garrison and Vaughan suggest using a “triggering event” to provide entry points for effective face-to-face communication (p.114). In their space at home, they can take as long as they need to comprehend the material and formulate ideas and opinions about the

material. In this way, students will have confidence to enter the face-to-face session with important ideas to add to the discussion. I believe it is extremely important to begin units with a positive experience for all my students. Giving them time to read and discover independently is the best method for facilitating a positive experience during the first class meeting for the unit.

Direct Instruction of Imagery: Teacher will introduce the concept of imagery using a multimedia presentation and the poem “Oranges” as an anchor piece for discussing the elements of imagery. Students will discuss as a whole class the examples of imagery present in the homework assignment. Students will break into small groups to discuss and analyze the imagery in a more challenging poem, “Daffodils” by William Wordsworth. Within their groups, students will evaluate the poem “Daffodils”ⁱⁱ for Wordsworth’s use of imagery. Students will organize their thoughts using a google document.

Face to face: Whole group and small group discussions will take place in the classroom.

Rationale: According to Picciano’s Multimodal Model, for social and emotional intelligences, students need face-to-face interaction (p. 15). This entire unit introduces the concept of peer review and critique; therefore, building trust amongst peers is important. Through small group work and face-to-face collaboration, students can build upon their social and emotional skills. Students at this age work need opportunities for “[i]ntegrated activities, small-group work, and a hands-on approach to learning” (Maxwell & Meiser, 2001, p. 18). Students practice collaborating online when they complete the group assignment using a tool like Google documents. I have chosen a more difficult poem for students to analyze in their small groups because students can now work together to help each other. Providing a challenging task encourages collaboration.

According to Garrison and Vaughan, when considering collaborative learning in the blended design, “[a]ctivities should be designed that encourage students to move away from awareness to knowledge construction and finally to application” (p. 92). For middle school students, I believe the face-to-face, small group is an excellent climate for facilitating knowledge construction.

Journaling/Reflection: Students will write in their journals in response to a prompt that encourages the use of imagery. Students will search the internet or their own photographs for a picture of something that presents a strong image to them.

Online: Student journaling will be an online, at home, activity.

Rationale: Picciano suggests that “[b]logs and blogging, whether as group activities or for individual journaling activities, are evolving as appropriate tools for students reflecting on what is being learned and on other aspects of course activities” (p. 15-16). Because this course is a writing course, each activity must return to the course objective: writing. Students will write a journal entry during which they attempt to include examples of imagery; thus, students have gone through the process from inquiry, awareness, knowledge construction, to application in their own writing. This component will be completed online because journaling is a private endeavor, many students enjoy working online, and the journal reinforces the lessons of the day. In addition, Keller recommends including “success opportunities” within the instructional design. In the case of a writing course, each time a student completes a journal they have successful met a goal and accomplished a task. For some, the task of writing for a length of time, is a challenge; for others, writing is a fun activity. In either case, there is a motivational reward.

Critiquing: In small groups, students will discuss the poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams and answer the question: *What depends upon this red wheelbarrow?* An emphasis

Face to face: Discussing the poem in small groups helps students

will be placed on providing evidence to support ideas. Groups will share their observations with the class.	work on their discussion skills using evidence.
<p><i>Rationale:</i> Providing the face-to-face time for students to discuss the question <i>What depends upon this red wheelbarrow?</i> is an opportunity for students to gain comfort discussing an abstract idea. Students will need to come to a consensus in their groups and provide the whole class with a specific answer to the question. As there is no right or wrong answer, students will need to support their group’s claim. The goal of this activity goes beyond interpreting a poem towards facilitating students’ ability to have opposing critiques of each other’s work – a skill they will need to feel comfortable with for upcoming activities.</p>	
<p>Writing an Imitation Poem: <u>Students</u> will independently begin writing their own imitations using the picture or image they have brought in from home.</p>	<p>Face to face: Students will begin writing their “Red Wheelbarrow” imitation poems.</p>
<p><i>Rationale:</i> Students will independently write their own imitations of “The Red Wheelbarrow” using their photos/images because it is important to continue to connect the class activities to the course objective. In addition, this is an incredibly short assignment that ties together the concept of an image with poetry. This assignment will provide another “success opportunity” prior to the formal assignment. Students in early adolescence are often “confused by self-doubt, and fearful of failure;” therefore, it is important for students to feel some success before the next writing assignment because they will be sharing this assignment with their peers (Maxwell & Meiser, 2001, p. 18).</p>	
<p>Journaling/Reflecting: <u>Students</u> will write in their journals in response to a prompt that asks the following question: <i>Think of a</i></p>	<p>Online: Student journaling will be an</p>

<p><i>situation in which you would want a friend to tell you something that you really did not want to hear. Write about that situation. Try to capture the emotions (consider using descriptive metaphors and similes).</i></p>	<p>online, at home, activity.</p>
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Rationale: As with previous journal entries, students will complete these at home. The objective of this journal, much like the first activity in this unit, is to build context for the upcoming class activity. Facilitation is stimulated by “provid[ing] stimulating questions,” and this journal prompt will be the “triggering event” for the face-to-face discourse the following day (Garrison & Vaughan, p. 94). In addition, the prompt encourages students to continue to apply the lessons on writing with imagery.

<p>Direct Instruction on The Importance of Feedback in Writing: <u>Teacher</u> will lead a class discussion on the importance of feedback and critiques in writing. Working in small groups, students will create a list of norms for critiquing and reviewing a peer’s work. Groups will then share their discoveries and insights with the class.</p>	<p>Face to face: Whole group and small group discussions will take place in the classroom.</p>
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Rationale: Garrison and Vaughan suggest creating a scoring guide for student participation in discussion forums based on teacher criteria “with student input” (p. 129). Middle school students have a strong sense of fairness, and “expect people to be fair with them,” so the students will respond positively to an opportunity to participate in the creation of grading criteria that they will find fair (Maxwell & Meiser, 2001, p. 19). As such, this activity will help give students the “buy-in” for participation and the confidence to know that evaluations are based upon meaningful criteria (Keller, 2010, p. 51). This discussion will be face-to-face because “[l]earning activities that take advantage of listening and talking should be considered for face-to-face context”

(Garrison & Vaughan, p. 95).	
Practicing Critiques: <u>Students, working in very small groups,</u> will practice critiquing each other's "Red Wheelbarrow" ⁱⁱⁱ imitation poems face-to-face.	Face to face: Small collaborative groups.
<p><u>Rationale:</u> In their "Hierarchy of Interaction," Moore and Kearsley (2012) recommend that the instructor facilitate activities to promote ongoing rapport among students (p.134). Students need practice and guidance through the process of working in groups and responding to each other's writing. Students tend to be concerned with hurting their friends' feelings and being polite regarding critique in peer editing, so guidance and practice are beneficial for effective collaboration (Maxwell & Meiser, p. 146; Gouge, 2009; Garrison & Vaughan, p. 35). Including this activity here, with a short piece of writing, in the face-to-face setting, I can circulate and correct ineffective behaviors in person before students engage in peer critique and review independently online. Garrison and Vaughan suggest that "[f]ace-to-face interaction has significant advantages in the early stages of community building ... and establishing trust to support collaborative learning. This trust can then be transferred to an online context" which is necessary for the next activity in this unit (p. 34).</p>	
"Drafting" to Appeal to the Senses: <u>Students, working independently,</u> will write in their journals in response to the following prompt: <i>Think of an important thing (toy, clothing, prize, etc.) or location (room, vacation spot, etc.) in your life. Write a two page personal narrative describing this thing or location. You may include some action, dialogue, etc. to establish the context for your item, but your goal is to describe the thing or location using imagery that helps</i>	Online/Face-to-Face: This assignment will be completed in class and at home. The "final" product will be published online.

<p><i>to express the emotions that make this particular thing/location important to you. Keep in mind that this thing/location does not necessary need to be associated with positive emotions. This will be considered the first draft.</i></p>	
<p><u>Rationale:</u> Students need opportunities to practice their writing and apply those skills. In this example, students are synthesizing what they have learned in writing and analyzing poetry to their own memories and ideas (Morrison, Ross, Kalman & Kemp, 2011, p.110). Asking students to write a personal narrative helps provide relevance to the assignment and removes the anxiety of trying to find something to write about, which often plagues early writers (Keller, 2010; Maxwell & Meiser, p. 140, 145). It is important to refer to all assignments as drafts so that students understand the process of multiple drafts and that drafts can always be improved upon; this helps students understand that perfection is not the goal (Maxwell & Meiser, p. 145). Students will have time in the face-to-face environment as well as in the online environment to work on this assignment. It is important to provide face-to-face time so that students who desire additional guidance from the teacher can have individual conferences.</p>	
<p><u>Peer Review:</u> <u>Students, working independently within assigned groups,</u> will critique each other's work in a discussion forum. Within the groups, students will be required to read and critique the work of their peers through responses on the discussion forum. Students will use the criteria formed during class discussion as a basis for writing effective critiques.</p>	<p><u>Online:</u> A discussion forum will be used for peer review.</p>
<p><u>Rationale:</u> Abrams found that students “were more willing to critique participants’ work in an online context because of the asynchronous nature of online learning” (as cited in Garrison &</p>	

Vaughan, p. 28). Therefore, the online forum is a perfect context for encouraging meaningful discourse amongst students. Working with other writers and readers helps students see their own work with a more critical eye (Maxwell & Meiser, p. 145). Students will be assigned groups for editing based upon informal teacher evaluations so that each group contains a heterogeneous mix of strong and weak writers. According to Ally's research, "[l]earners will also be able to use the strengths of other learners, and to learn from others. When assigning learners for group work, membership should be based on the expertise level and learning style of individual group members, so that individual team members can benefit from one another's strengths" (Ally, 2004, p. 19). The instructor's scoring rubric will be available so that students can critique one another based on the teacher's grading rubric for assessment. Providing the rubric in advance to students helps give students confidence that they know the instructor's expectations (Keller, 2010, p. 51; Garrison & Vaughan, p. 137).

Reflection 1: Students, working individually, will reflect on the peer evaluation process through a combination of journaling and survey responses.

Online: Students will use their online journal and a survey created using www.quia.com.

Rationale: Reflection is essential for three reasons. First, as the instructor, I will need to evaluate the peer review process for this assignment in order to make future instructional choices. I will use the results as an informal formative evaluation (Morrison, Ross, Kalman & Kemp, 2011, p. 344, 352). Second, students require time to think and reflect upon their own learning (Ally, p. 19; Garrison & Vaughan, p. 133, 136). Third, student writers need time to evaluate the feedback from their peers and choose which pieces of advice to follow and which pieces to ignore; however, they must have time to give all of the feedback careful consideration (Maxwell &

Meiser, p. 147).

Revising and Publishing: Students, working in pairs and individually, will make final revisions and “publish” their final drafts to an online forum for the entire class to share.

Face-to-Face/Online:
Students will collaborate face-to-face with a peer for revisions. Students will submit drafts to the class discussion board.

Rationale: Students will work face-to-face with a peer of their choice to edit their final drafts for grammar, conventions, etc. Students can work with their peer partners to make decisions about other edits as recommended by their peer reviewers. Students will then go “online” to “publish” final drafts to a discussion board that is shared with the class. This process (from the very beginning) has slowly assisted students to become more independent until they finally make revisions and “publish” a final draft.

“Critical Acclaim”: Students, working as a class “team,” will provide “critical acclaim” to the published drafts on the discussion board. Students will provide feedback to three “new” peers. Critiques will be based on an elaboration of the original set of criteria.

Online: Students will provide feedback on the discussion board.

Rationale: In the final activity, students will be required to read and evaluate the writing assignments of three new peers. In this round of critiques, students will be asked to elaborate on additional criteria of the assignment based on responses to the survey during the reflection activity. The focus of this critique will be anchored on the “imagery” presented and the overall effect of the papers. Students will be asked to select “favorites” and describe why. The overall purpose of this critique is “acclaim” – or finding what’s done well.^{iv} As Garrison and Vaughan

continuously point out, there is “deeper critical thinking in online discussions” (p. 36).	
<p>Reflection 2: <u>Students, working individually</u>, will reflect on this entire unit through a reflection on learning.</p>	<p>Online: Students will use their online journal and a survey created using www.quia.com.</p>
<p><i>Rationale:</i> Reflection is essential at this point for the learners to evaluate their own learning process through this assignment. Ally suggests that “learners can be asked to generate a learning journal during the learning process to encourage reflection and processing” (p. 20). When given the opportunity to reflect upon their accomplishments, students are able to evaluate their own progress as learners, and, hopefully, make adjustments for future assignments. Garrison and Vaughan assert that “[a]ppropriately designed learning journals can foster reflection to allow students awareness of and strategies for the process of collaboration and its impact on their learning” (p. 98). As the process of peer evaluation will be an integral part of the creative writing course, it is essential that students are comfortable with the process and able to grow from their first experience with peer critiques in the online discussion context.</p>	

Note on “Small Groups”: The make-up of the small groups will change depending on the activity. My objective in grouping students is to expose them to as many of their peers as possible in a short amount of time. First, this course is only twelve weeks long, so I must maximize the instructional time. Second, this unit will take place within the second week of the course. Providing students time to work with as many of their peers as possible in a short amount of time will benefit students by exposing them to new perspectives and ideas, by introducing them to as many of their peers as possible, and by helping them to develop skills necessary to

adapt to new groups for longer durations during later units in class.

Some Potential Issues and Concerns: In their text, Garrison and Vaughan caution against creating “too much class” or a class that is the equivalent to a class and a half. I need to be wary of this because (1) I am accustomed to teaching high school, (2) it has been years since I have taught an elective, (3) twelve weeks feels like such a short time to accomplish so much, (4) it’s hard not to think of the blended components as “extras” in addition to the class time. One potential solution would be to build in two days a week that are “free study” days so that students can potentially complete some of their blended activities during class and/or complete assignments for other classes to free up time to work on the blended components at home. This would need to be cleared with administration prior to planning for “free” class periods.

Choices of Technology: The following technologies will be utilized: “blogs,” discussion boards, webpages, and mash-ups to access multimedia content. The theories and rationale for my choices for media and technologies are outlined within the Unit Outline section of this instructional design plan. I hope to use www.coursesites.com, which is a free version of BlackBoard that is produced by BlackBoard. Through www.coursesites.com LMS, I can create discussion boards and students can create journals for the “blogging.” Because my students will be 12-years-old, creating true open blogs may not be practical or advisable. This is one aspect of the project that I will have to further investigate.

Where Does This Unit Fit In? This unit falls at the beginning of a twelve-week creative writing course. Prior to this unit, students will have spent a week on smaller lessons that introduced features of the online learning environment as well as some fundamental writing activities. The

result of the imagery unit will be their first two completed writing assignments, the imitation poem and the personal narrative. These two pieces will constitute two of the six final pieces in their portfolios at the end of the twelve-week course. I hope to create the entire course as a blended learning course. This unit complements the entire course because it introduces the idea of descriptive writing that appeals to the senses (imagery), which is a cornerstone of effective creative writing. Furthermore, this unit introduces the concept, benefit, and process of peer critiques and evaluations, and drafting. As I explained in the “Unit Outline” (above), peer critiques and evaluations, and drafting are essential to the process of becoming a good writer. These will be foundations for the rest of the course.

Assessment Plans

- Participation in the Peer Reviews: Garrison and Vaughan contend that “if an online discussion is integral to your course objectives, you should communicate an expectation for participation” (p. 129). Therefore, I intend on creating and providing a rubric for evaluating students’ participation in the forum based on class discussions on the norms for “effective” critiques. Students will also receive points for “completion” in addition to assessment that is evaluative in nature.
- Completion of Related Journals/Blogs: I plan on assessing journals at regular intervals that would be unrelated to assessment within the unit. Journals will be assessed according to a rubric, which I will provide at the beginning of the course. In general, journaling “grades” should be awarded for completion, engagement, and perceived effort. Students will have opportunities after this unit to use journal entries as “jumping off points” for formal assignments in their portfolios.
- Comprehension of Imagery: Based upon participation and contribution to group work as

assessed through informal teacher observation, I can assess students' comprehension of imagery. I can further assess their application of this concept through the assessment of their poems, reading the related journal prompt, and through the strength of the critique of their peers' writings.

- Imitation Poem: This will be assessed using a rubric that will measure the strength of the language in portraying the image, the effectiveness of the imitation, and the quality of the poem.
- Final Draft of Personal Narrative: This piece will be assessed using a rubric which will be provided in advance. The rubric will measure attributes such as the use of imagery, use of the writing process, standard grammar and conventions, and strength of word choice. (Word choice will most likely be the introductory unit at the beginning of the course.)
- Reflections: Although both reflections will technically be assessed within the overall journal grade, I believe it will be important to "reflect upon the reflections" as soon as they are completed so that I can make necessary changes to the structure of the course as rapidly as possible. Twelve weeks is a short time, and I need to be flexible and be able to adapt and make changes whenever necessary.

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ⁱ I typically try to design/create something brand-new for each class I take; however, I will really be teaching creative writing next year *and* will have the actual ability to test these blended learning components with real students. I felt this was efficient use of my time.

ⁱⁱ I would like to possibly come up with four poems total so that each group is analyzing a different poem for its imagery. Then, groups could create a short little presentation to share the imagery they discovered, thus exposing students to more examples. At this time, all of my resources are packed in boxes, so I will have to see if I can find the poems I'm looking for later.

ⁱⁱⁱ To read this poem, go to this website: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174770>

^{iv} Concern: what if no one responds to a specific paper? I am still thinking of a method for preventing anyone from feeling left out. Perhaps re-establish the norms prior to this discussion board?