Students majoring in a variety of fields teach creative-writing classes to kids in Tuscaloosa elementary, middle and high schools.

University of Alabama students are teaching kids to let their imaginations run wild as part of creative writing classes in Tuscaloosa-area public schools. UA Writers in the Schools, a student-led program, sends UA students into elementary, middle and high schools, where they teach kids how to produce poetry, short fiction and other forms of creative writing.

“A lot of kids haven’t tried to be creative before,” says Kenny Kruse, a Writers in the Schools founder who earned a master of fine arts degree in creative writing in December 2014. “They can do whatever they want. No right or wrong. It’s fun watching them work through that and allow themselves to be creative.”

The idea began when Kruse went to a creative-writing conference in Boston. “I heard about all these people doing great work around the country,” Kruse says. “So I wondered, why don’t we have something like that here?”

Kruse gathered Sally Rodgers, Molly Goldman and Freya Gibbon, also students in UA’s MFA program, to start the project. “We didn’t feel connected to Tuscaloosa,” Kruse says. “We wanted to get involved and find a way to use our skills to make a positive change in the community.”

According to the National Endowment for the Arts, research indicates creative education improves high school graduation rates and kids’ performance in core subjects, but many schools have cut back or eliminated arts programs due to budget constraints. Kruse says creative education even increases voting and volunteering, and all these improvements are especially needed in communities with underfunded schools.

“Many kids have never even seen the University campus,” Kruse says of children in some Tuscaloosa-area schools. “It’s interesting to see the difference in resources between the University and some of the schools next door.”

Kruse, Rodgers, Goldman and Gibbon gathered information and ideas from those operating creative-writing programs in other parts of the country and met with administrators in Tuscaloosa city and county schools.

Through a pilot program in Fall 2013, the four MFA students taught creative-writing lessons to more than 400 kids at Central High School and Northridge High School.

During the Spring and Fall 2014 semesters, 32 UA students with majors including creative writing, English, psychology, family and human development, journalism, education and gender and race studies taught 1,300 kids in eight schools through hour-long, weekly or biweekly lessons.

UA students lead a variety of engaging exercises to help kids think outside usual channels. Some, such as writing their own fictional biographies, require kids to blend fiction and non-fiction about their own lives. Group activities include creating a collective writing by passing around a page and having each child read only what the previous child wrote and then add to the story.

“The kids are always energetic and creative and open to new ideas,” says Jonathan Dubow, who is pursuing an MFA in creative writing and works with first graders at Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School. “Towards the end of last year, I did a lesson where we stood in a circle and improvised blues songs, which they completely took to.”

Depending on teachers’ preferences, UA students design stand-alone lessons or integrate creative writing into content kids are currently studying. In one class at Eastwood Middle School, for example, UA writers used a story kids were already reading to teach them about metaphors. Kids found metaphors in the story and then wrote their own.

Janine Siatkowski, who teaches ninth grade English at Central High School, says the collaboration between the UA Writers in Schools and kids has been a rewarding experience. “A lot of kids haven’t tried to be creative before,” Siatkowski says. “They can do whatever they want. No right or wrong. It’s fun watching them work through that and allow themselves to be creative.”

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the Schools program and her curriculum is beneficial to everyone involved. “I think that WITS is a great opportunity for those who are passionate about writing and about cultivating that passion in others,” Siatkowski says. “When community and education come together, it truly is the perfect amalgamation for success in the classroom. I am a huge supporter of WITS and would love to see this program grow.”

Rodgers, who is pursuing an MFA in poetry, teaches fourth graders at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School and says the children inspire her in terms of her own writing. “They use language in ways I’ve never thought of, and when I leave a WITS session, I usually feel like going home and writing myself,” Rodgers says.

Gabby Smith, who is pursuing a PhD in social psychology, worked with ninth graders at Central High School in Spring 2014 and with sixth graders at Westlawn Middle School in Fall 2014. She says she often is able to make connections with her psychology degree when teaching. In one case, she led a persuasive writing exercise that asked kids to argue for or against school uniforms. "One student said there’s a girl who gets bullied for not having many clothes because her parents don’t have much money," Smith says. "She argued having uniforms would help her. What they come up with on their own is really powerful. They’re amazing little human beings.”

Smith’s class has helped kids move out of their comfort zones. “I used to be afraid to get in front of people, but now I’m not,” says Shaquana Parson, a sixth grader at Westlawn Middle School.

Kennedy Jackson, also a sixth grader at Westlawn, says the lessons make her less scared of writing. “It makes me feel funny and smart and creative,” she says.

Kruse says Writers in the Schools founders are focusing on underserved schools as the initiative grows, but hope to expand to all Tuscaloosa city and county schools.

In Summer 2014, the program also began partnering with a juvenile detention center for girls. At the Girls Intensive Education and Treatment Facility in Tuscaloosa, UA students led nine girls through exercises in slam poetry, writing to music, “list” poems, surrealism and free association. Rodgers says these activities allowed girls to “engage with language and narrative in a fun, low-pressure way.” The program continues to work with approximately 10 girls each semester.

Kruse says WITS founders hope to leave a continuing legacy. “We are trying to find a way to embed this in the graduate program so it keeps going,” he says. “We are handing it off to responsible people.” The group also is working to partner the program with a faculty member who will make WITS participation a service-learning component of an undergraduate English class.

“We’ve worked really hard to meet school teachers, administrators and interested community members,” Rodgers says. In 2014, the UA Writers in the Schools program joined the national Writers in the Schools Alliance, a network of literary arts education programs and individuals who serve K-12 students. The partnership allows students to meet other program administrators and attend events and panels with the goal of improving the UA initiative.

With opportunities limited for creative education during elementary, middle and high school, Kruse says spreading the joy of creative writing in the classroom is vital. “The research has shown that there are important, measurable ways that arts education improves our lives,” Kruse says. “The whole motivation for all of these programs is to expose kids to creative education with the belief that creative writing helps kids in many areas of life.”

For more information about UA Writers in the Schools, contact the program’s director, Connor O’Neill, at connor.towne@gmail.com.