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CREATIVE WRITING -
A TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Recently, on Teaching Experience, I had cause to reflect on the state and status of "Creative Writing" in the primary school. What I would like to offer in this article are some of my thoughts on the subject of helping pupils to master the conventions of writing and the problem of encouraging them to become writers. In addition I will attempt to offer an alternative approach to much of what I saw.

Before I begin let me declare my position: I am not one of those who would deny that "creative writing" has any place in the syllabus. Far from it. My position is quite simply that, if teachers and/or students are going to attempt it, they should be working from some sort of coherent theoretical base. That is, they should have some notion of what they are asking their pupils to do and further, how best to help them achieve their objectives. They should at least have some idea of what processes are implicit when they set their classes writing tasks.

I know there are those among my colleagues who claim that practice should precede theory; that theory should be evolved from practice. I dispute this notion primarily for two reasons. Firstly, the implication is that theory is then subservient to practice and has no function other than to illustrate practice. If that is so one must ask: why bother wasting one's time evolving a theory when obviously it has no effect on practice? This is not an idle question for it seems to me that it illustrates much of the problem that lies behind current English teaching in the classroom.

That is, so-called rules of grammar are taught in a vacuum as disembodied theory. I shall return to this issue later. Secondly, in reality, some sort of theoretical notion always precedes action. Often the theory is bad, or ill-defined, or merely a loosely held collection of unexamined, untested assumptions, but it is there nonetheless. Unreflective action in the classroom seldom has desirable results. However, it is in the classroom that we often see what happens to children who are not taught to write according to solid theoretical principles: they thrash around in vain in their own linguistic quagmires quickly drowning in despair. To extend my metaphor: rescue operations are launched from time to time thereafter [in the name of remedial work] accompanied by anguished wailing about falling standards from teachers and bank managers in sanctimonious letters to the press - but to little avail.

What I saw on Teaching Experience confirms my prejudices. Our present crop of students have little understanding of the function of theory. But they do have a technique which, judging by the number of times I saw it put into operation in all its variations, is derived from some source of [dubious] methodological respectability.

Methodologies that ignore such fundamentals as asking "what?" and "why?" and that concentrate on how to get things done are typical of a technocratic, mechanistic approach to education. Very often they have the appearance of working, of achieving desired results but inevitably upon close examination the results turn out to be more apparent than real.

Let me sketch the kind of lesson I saw in a number of variations on Teaching Experience to illustrate my point. All the "Creative Writing" lessons

I saw proceeded in more or less the following way: a short period at the beginning of the lesson labelled "stimulation" in which the pupils were invited to participate in some sort of fantasy which was meant to capture their imagination. We, that is the children and I, were taken on journeys into outer space, the depths of the ocean and in time machines back into the past. We were invited to help in solving crimes and espionage intrigues. The lengths to which students went showed considerably ingenuity and imagination. Inevitably, the full armoury of tape-recorders, slide-tape programmes, colourful pictures, cross-word puzzles, diagrams, disguises complete with slouch hats and false noses was used. Once the children indicated their willingness to participate in the game, the student asked them the sorts of questions designed to elicit further response and assist in the willing suspension of disbelief all of which was punctuated by frequent and sometimes desperate invocations to them to "use their imagination". The time came, as it had to, when the student presented the children with pieces of paper and asked them to record their adventures and/or impressions. The children were assured that there were no right answers. All they had to do was write. The important thing was to use their imaginations [As a special reward it was sometimes suggested that they illustrate their stories - but only when they had finished writing if there was enough time before the bell went for the end of the period. In the students' preparation this was labelled "integration!"]. The children then settled dutifully to work.

Later, in the staffroom, at the beginning of the postmortem session on what students still insist on calling a "crit. lesson", I was presented with a wad of paper and asked to confirm their delight on the writing produced by the class. The "best"

efforts were always at the top of the pile.

- Invariably my students were taken aback when I opened the discussion, not by exclaiming about the wonderful writing that had been produced, but by asking a number of questions. The first of these was: "When last did you write a short story/poem?" This was usually followed by an embarrassed silence. In order to move the discussion onto a less personal level, my next questions were, "Whom do you consider the more creative, Einstein or Shakespeare? Did the writing of Hamlet require more creativity than the development of the theory of relativity?" And: "What do you understand by creativity?" Obviously, I was not looking for or expecting coherent answers to these questions. Their function was to raise doubts in the students' minds about issues they had taken pretty much for granted until then.

My first question was intended to get the students to start thinking about what they were asking the children to do. Most people find writing difficult at the best of times. Very few people actually sit down and think about writing a short story. The thought is too intimidating no matter how attractive the sense of achievement might be. Student teachers are past-masters at requiring children to do, and do with the minimum of reflection, things that they would never attempt themselves. However, I believe that if teachers are going to ask children to do something as complex as writing a story they should show them that they are prepared to go through some of the agony with them, thereby proving that they are sensitive to the problems they have created for their pupils. Students may then be a little more circumspect and thoughtful

about the kinds of writing exercises they set their pupils.

My last question "What do you understand by creativity?" proved to be the most difficult to answer. But what emerged from our discussion was a recognition that for most of us, creativity [whatever it may be] cannot be turned on like a tap. It needs to be nurtured, given time and space to do its work. Further, it was acknowledged after some debate that Einstein was probably no less creative than Shakespeare - ultimately these things cannot be measured. This was an important breakthrough for it implied that "creativity" was not the sole prerogative of artists and, more importantly, it provided me with the platform I needed to suggest an alternative approach to the problem of encouraging children to write. For, one of the major issues associated with the whole question of writing at school [and in society at large for that matter] is that what is recognized as poetry and fiction is in some mystical way more creative, superior in fact to other types of writing. And that those who indulge in such writing must of necessity be superior to other lesser mortals who do not. This is a prejudice with many honourable advocates from at least Sir Philip Sidney to F.R. Leavis. And they may well be right, but it is not a notion that can be allowed to rest unexamined. Let me explain.

In our schools we are faced with a paradox. For, while "creative writing" is considered superior to other forms of writing it is not recognized as having much to do with the real world. It is not utilitarian. It need not be evaluated for marks. It is a short step from asserting that "creative writing" should not be evaluated, to

saying it cannot be evaluated, to saying it is worthless. I would not be surprised if such unconscious reasoning is fairly representative of teachers and pupils alike. It may go some way to explaining the sorry state in which language teaching finds itself today.

"Creative Writing" is that time of the week or term, it would appear, when pupils are expected to produce quantities of writing for the sheer joy of giving expression to their imagination. However, the real world cannot be denied quite so easily. From the beginning the children realise they are being asked to collaborate in an elaborate sham fraught with all sorts of vested interests. And for the most part they do collaborate because they have been well brought up and disciplined and told to obey and please their elders. A small minority of children who are adept at playing the system usually manages to produce pieces of writing that are of sufficient quality to convince the student that the lesson has been a success - the handwriting is neat, the spelling is fairly consistent, sentences appear to be well formed, paragraphing seems to have been observed and there is plenty of evidence that imagination has been used. This last is nearly always equated with the pupil's ability to enter into some fantasy or other. The teacher has the evidence she needs to prove her lesson a success and the "bright" pupils get their work displayed on the classroom wall. Everyone is happy. Or, are they? The vast majority of the pupils sit for the obligatory 30 minutes [10 minutes having devoted to "stimulation"] gazing out of the window, trying to look busy, hoping something will materialize miraculously on the blank page in front of them, attempting many false starts, wondering if the bell will rescue them. When the bell does go, various

scraps of paper are covered with a few lines of badly spelled, ungrammatical incoherence. There is a saving grace though: they have been assured that none of the conventions of writing need be taken into account. Marks will not be awarded. Nothing has been lost after all.

Clearly something is very wrong. Part of what is wrong, it seems to me, is the students' understanding of the nature of writing. Questions that need to be posed include: How does composition take place? What is the relationship between making meaning and writing? Does W.H. Auden's remark' "How do I know what I mean until I have seen what I have written?" have any relevance for us as teachers? Why is writing important? What conceptual processes does the writer have to go through in order to achieve success? I do not wish to assert that there are any easy answers to these questions but I do believe that they cannot be avoided if our students are going to have any chance of success in the classroom.

If, as a working proposition, it can be assumed that creativity consists in recognizing and establishing new connections, combinations and possibilities and giving formal expression to those possibilities then it might be asserted that all writing is creative.

If I am correct that all writing is creative, or at least involves an element of creativity, the thought that immediately comes to mind is that all writing that children do at school could/should be equally exciting, relevant and an important element in the child's overall linguistic development. Instead of putting "creative writing" into a separate compartment which might be opened once a fortnight or a term, or when student

teachers have to think up something that will impress their bored lecturers, it can be seen as an integral part of all the writing experiences a child might have across the curriculum.

Instead of making the teacher's life impossibly more complicated, as it might seem at first glance, this proposition in fact simplifies the teacher's task. An advantage is that the so-called "language" period could be abolished. This seems radical in the extreme but let us consider some of the implications: the conventions of acceptable writing [spelling, sentence construction, concord, paragraphing, punctuation, direct and indirect speech, etc.] could be integrated where they are relevant into writing exercises in Religious Instruction, Geography, History, General Science and even Maths. Spelling tests, for example, could be set on lists of words that are subject specific. Pupils would then not be learning language skills in a vacuum but in a context which they could immediately apprehend. The model I am assuming sees the teacher as a generalist, however it is my contention that the same principle can be applied in those schools where teachers are specialists. All teachers already have the necessary specialised expertise in language even if it is only tacit knowledge derived from the fact that they are familiar with the language conventions of their particular subjects, all of which have very many features in common with the other subjects across the curriculum. One can assume, for instance, that the use of the capital letter, full stop, comma and what is regarded as correct spelling, as well as well formed sentences or paragraphs, will not change much from subject to subject. While the possibilities for constant re-enforcement [much beyond the capacity of the traditional English teacher] is immense.

Imagined dialogues between historical personalities could be used to teach, among other things, sentence construction, the use of inverted commas, and the difference between formal and informal language while at the same time heightening the pupils' awareness of the different conventions that apply to spoken and written discourse. The creation of a newspaper could be used as a vehicle to encourage children to write a variety of articles on any number of subjects drawn from the curriculum. The need to obey the conventions of writing would be immediately apparent.

Further, the process of composition from rough notes through a number of rough drafts and ultimately the final copy could be easily inculcated in a variety of subject contexts, each re-enforcing the other. If writing in Geography or General Science or, as it frequently is, in so-called comprehension tests is seen not merely as a series of lists, one-sentence answers or gaps to be filled in, but as coherent statements about issues/topics/questions, then the children and hopefully the teachers will realise the reason for the conventions that govern written discourse - all of which have to do with clarity, elegance and precision.

Each piece of writing should, in the interests of clarity, elegance and precision go through something like the following process: a series of rough notes evolving into a series of rough drafts each of which becomes progressively more clear, elegant and precise until as good a copy as can be reasonably expected is arrived at. The more extended the piece of writing the more time should be allowed for its completion. And the more chance there should be of its going public. That is, there should be every chance that it will be read by a wider audience than

that provided by the class teacher. There are few incentives more pressing than the knowledge that many people are likely to read what one has written.

As for the writing of poetry and short stories, the important thing to remember is that ample opportunity should be given to the pupils to choose from as large a variety of subjects as possible. The competent teacher should know her class well enough to be able to cater in this respect for their individual interests. As far as the student who is on TE is concerned my advice is: stick to developing writing skills in the subject area you are familiar with. If you want to exploit the child's capacity for fantasy do so within the structured framework of your particular interest. There is no reason why such a writing experience should not be as exciting as anything that is usually associated with "creative writing" and you will probably be able to get much better results, while at the same time making sure that the conventions are adhered to. You start with the advantage that the pupils have a subject or subject matter on which they can exercise their imaginations. Given the constrictions of time on TE and the amount of time needed for worthwhile results TE should be planned so that all the stages outlined above in the writing process can be worked through with the object of arriving at the final draft of an extended piece of writing towards the beginning of the third week. This will give you the opportunity to assess and discuss it with the class before you disappear out of their lives.

The important qualification to all this is that the process of writing is never finally learnt, never finally mastered but is an ongoing part

of the individual's personal evolution. Hence the need for constant re-enforcement in a variety of contexts each of which while having much in common with the others also presents its own unique demands on the writer and reader alike.

Appendix: For those readers who are interested in the theoretical basis for the methodology proposed in this article the following books will prove invaluable: James Britton, Language and Learning The Bullock Report, Chapter 12. Michael Marland, Language Across the Curriculum Mike Tobe ed. Language Policies in Action

WINNER OF THE 50 WORD SHORT STORY
COMPETITION

BY SECOND YEAR, MOST OF DEBBIE'S FRIENDS
HAD BECOME ENGAGED.

Each College day, the flat Boksburg lake and the grey Benoni dump saw her in and out on the R22.

Nice looking, in an invisible sort of way, her teachers thought she'd like young children.

Diploma'd now, her school so close. She hardly braves the highway, or the big city.

(NIGEL THARG)

**FROM
TILDA**

I JUST WROTE
A SHORT STORY.
LISTEN...

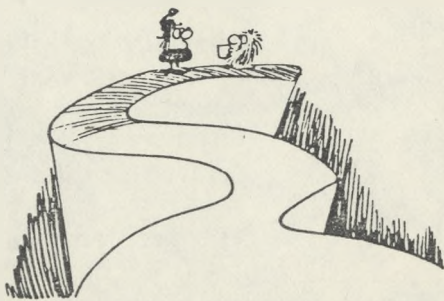
"Once upon a time
there was a lovely
young princess who
lived in a castle in a
far-off mythical
kingdom..."



He competed against Johnny Weismuller
many times during the late 1920's.
This was the time of the great de-
pression during which many huge
fortunes were lost...



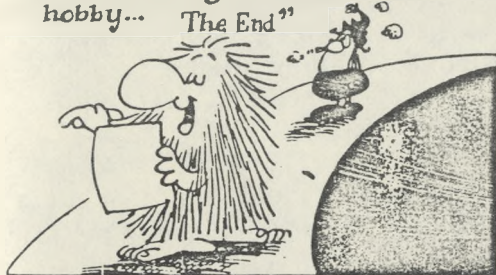
The castle was designed by her
uncle Hernando who was an
architect in a nearby city. He
was also a fine family man and
was once an excellent swimmer...



Next door to Hernando's office
was a tattoo parlor. Many of
our country's brave young
fighting men went there for
tattoos of their mothers,
Barney Google, and Eleanor
Roosevelt...



It was these same young men
who displayed such courage on
Bataan and Iwo Jima. The courage
that made this country safe for
you, me, our children, zoo animals
and restoring old Hudsons as a
hobby... The End"



WELL, YOU'VE GOT
TO ADMIT, IT HAS
SCOPE!

