

## Creating Opportunities for Creative Writing

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How would you respond if asked to sit down and write a poem without any introduction or warm-up activities? Would you be able to do it? I wouldn't. Nor would I consider this to be a fair classroom activity for a teacher to ask of his/her students.

At a recent workshop conducted at Stella Maris Primary School in Suva, teachers from Stella Maris, Veiuto Primary and Raiwaqa Methodist thought about ways of motivating their learners to write, integrating creative writing into the curriculum and enjoying the literature their students create.

We began by thinking about what creative writing is. What, for instance, is a poem? Does it have to rhyme? Who can write a poem?

The idea of a poem can conjure up fearful images of tightly balanced rhythm, elegantly orchestrated rhymes, clever images and generally a very sophisticated use of language. But most poems today don't rhyme, and a paragraph can be easily translated into a poem by simply realigning what has been written in prose. A good poem says something to the reader. How this is framed on the page is secondary. In other words, creative writing shouldn't be seen only in terms of form. What is creative in writing is self-expression, first and foremost.

So how can the teacher help his/her students to express themselves creatively?

First of all, students need to develop a feel for literature if they are to create it. This means that one of the best things a teacher can do to motivate his/her students to write is to provide enjoyable literature for the class: read stories, poems and plays to them and with them. Stories should not carry attached questions but should be read for pleasure. What student can enjoy a story if he/she is waiting for the assessable questions to follow? Literature is meant to be enjoyed. This is an important first step in encouraging literary appreciation. We need to nurture students' appreciation of literature and extend it to appreciation of their own and their classmates' writing.

We learn to write stories, poems and plays by writing them. Students need plenty of practice in order to build up confidence in their writing. So they must be encouraged to write and write often. How can we motivate our learners to do this?

Teachers need to provide opportunities for students to think and feel that will lead on to writing. Many suggestions can be taken from current language teaching practice.

1. **Language experience** - drawing on the learner's world - is a useful method for inspiring creative writing. Language experience builds on the language and personal experiences of the learners. Poems, stories and plays are based on what children have to say - rather than on what the teacher would like to teach them.

Here are some activities that use a language experience orientation:

- Have students draw pictures of their families and orally describe the pictured family members to the class. Then have them create a family portrait in words to accompany their drawings.
- Read this verse from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (12th century, translated by Edward Fitzgerald, 19th century) to the class:

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Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,  
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse - and Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness-  
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.

Base a discussion on the following questions: Do you think this is a good picnic? What is your idea of the ideal picnic? You can then help students to turn their descriptions, given orally first, into written paragraphs, and then into a story or poem.

- Ask students to do the following: Go out into the school compound and look around. What is beautiful? A well-loved swing? a pretty flower? a cloud? a rainbow? a wave breaking against the shore? a mountain peak...? Have students describe their chosen views to each other in small groups. Then have them write their views down in a few lines. Convert these lines to a haiku (seventeen syllables, three lines of five-seven-five), if possible, or a haiku-inspired short poem (three or four lines only)<sup>1</sup>. Here are some examples of haikus to guide you:

### A Haiku

Sharp prickly bushes  
stabbing little bold insects  
crawling across leaves.

(Emma Tapealava [Tonga], *Our World*, 1991)

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Wispy shoots of bright  
startled green, tender growth on  
so ancient a land.

(Heather Lotherington, *Chinese Haikus*, unpublished, 1982)

2. **Using process writing** - pair or small group brainstorming for ideas with successive conferencing and editing towards the final draft - is an important mechanism for greasing creative wheels. We must be inspired to write creatively! But this inspiration can be systematically aroused through the process writing approach.

Here are some activities amenable to a process-based writing approach that you might like to try:

- While you read a story or poem in which there is plenty of action, the students mime the action in small groups. They can then perform their mimed story to the whole class as you read. Afterwards they might like to try to compose an individual or collaborative poem or story to which they can do other similar actions. You can help the class to write a poem collaboratively, or arrange for students from higher level classes to help small groups of pre-writers to get their thoughts down on paper in cross-age tutoring.

<sup>1</sup> Creativity in language may include an innovative written form but form should not imprison the writer.

Here is an example of a poem that can be used for this activity with Class One:

### **Hoppity**

Christopher Robin goes  
Hoppity, hoppity,  
Hoppity, hoppity, hop.  
Whenever I tell him  
Politely to stop it, he  
Says he can't possibly stop.  
If he stopped hopping, he couldn't go anywhere,  
Poor little Christopher  
Couldn't go anywhere...  
That's why he *always* goes  
Hoppity, hoppity,  
Hoppity,  
Hoppity,  
Hop.

(A.A. Milne, *When We were Very Young*, 1924)

- Having the class design a greeting card for a special purpose: Mother's Day, Father's Day, a birthday, wedding or even a funeral, if the occasion arises. Have the children think about the person or people they have designed the card for, write a short personal note to him, her or them, redraft their notes as poetry, and, lastly, copy final drafts into their greeting cards. Send the cards.
- Read a student's poem on a theme of interest to the class. After discussion, have the class respond to the poem by writing another poem, a story or a letter to the poet. Here are some student-written poems to start with until you can draw on the poems written by students in your school:

### **Mount Voma**

Mount Voma, Mount Voma  
so high and far away  
sometimes you frown half hidden by clouds  
but always and forever  
you stand up straight and tall  
reminding the people of Namosi  
of the cross on your mountain top.

(Aloisio Rauto [Fiji], *Our World*, 1991)

### **Homesick**

I remember Nauru  
where the sun was shimmering  
on the waves  
and where the palm leaves swayed  
when the songs of Nauru  
fill my ears  
I get homesick  
for my little island, Nauru.

(Elna Tatabwiy [Nauru] *Our World*, 1991)

3. **Content-based writing** - where learners are timid and require some structure to help them to write, use a content-based writing approach - genre translation. Students can translate a familiar story into a poem or reported speech from the newspaper into a play. They can take materials from other subject areas using language across the curriculum to inspire poems, stories or plays on scientific or historical themes, or they can explore more popular media by turning material into rap, a pop song or an advertising jingle, for example.

In a closely related adaptation exercise, students can rewrite a foreign story, play or poem to local circumstances.

Here are some activities that use a content-based writing approach:

- Read a familiar story, legend or fairy tale to the class. Have the students adapt it to local circumstances, or write it as a play or an epic poem. You might like to try familiar local legends, the legends of other countries or well-known fairy tales, such as **The Three Little Pigs**, which could be adapted as **The Three Little Mynahs**, for example. (Contact the IOE Literacy Centre, USP, for stories from other countries.)
  - Locate subject matter using language-across-the-curriculum: choose a theme from science, for instance, arrange the students in small groups and have them write descriptive pieces about the theme chosen. A science lesson on the metamorphosis of a butterfly could form the basis for poems or short descriptions of a beautiful butterfly, a creepy crawly caterpillar or the process of metamorphosis itself. If students have trouble getting started, read them *The Hungry Caterpillar* and have them adapt the foods eaten by the caterpillar in the book to local foods.
4. **Writing in the vernacular** - for learners who are insufficiently confident or proficient in English, encourage writing in the vernacular. A poem or story can be written in a language experience or process writing lesson or series of lessons and translated into English after the creative work has been done. This allows learners to develop language and increase their understanding of English at the same time without feeling inadequate.

Creative writing should be incorporated into the language curriculum, giving meaningful expression to sub-writing and multi-media activities. Children learning language love to experiment with rhyme and drama. These activities build naturally towards creative writing, for instance:

- Have students mime a funny/sad/embarrassing/happy encounter in small groups. The mimes can then be performed for the class, and scripts written for the plays. Groups can script their own mimes or the mimes of other groups.
- Play a circle game<sup>2</sup>. Seat the whole class in a big circle. See how many rhyming words, foods, smells, feelings, etc. the students can come up with in response to your cue. Afterwards, when they have returned to their regular places, ask them to write about what they have contributed in the circle game in the form of a poem or a story. Here are some starters:

The teacher says:

I feel happy/sad/angry when...

Animals say ...

My favourite food is ...

<sup>2</sup>Thanks to Krissi Way, EDC53 student, Nauru, 1993, for demonstration of circle games.

and each student completes the sentence in turn going around the circle. The teacher can change direction or theme at any time.

Now that students (and teachers!) have written poems, stories and plays, they must be published! All student writing should be published - whether in book or poster form or in terms of performance. A poem can be publicly read, for example. If this activity is based on reading published literature, it can help students to find their own voices in the writing of others. Poems can also be danced to, sung, and illustrated.

Here are some ideas to help you:

- Put students in groups of three, and encourage them to choose a poem from a selection of student and published writing. The members of the group will then each take one of the following roles: (1) illustrates the poem, (2) prints it with coloured pencils or stencils or using special calligraphy, and, if the poem is original, as the group would like to see it on the page (centred, right-justified, in a mathematical shape, etc.) and (3) reads it to the group/class. The reader can practise while the illustrators are doing their work. When each group is finished illustrating and performing, collate the poems to make a class reading book of favourite poetry.
- Encourage students to practise performance readings of drama, dramatic poetry or short stories, individually chosen. (Pieces can be chosen from student writing, too!) Then have them perform their chosen readings. Here is a fun practice poem (which can be simultaneously mimed by other students):

#### **Time to rise**

A birdie with a yellow bill  
Hopped upon the window sill,  
Cocked his shining eye and said:  
"Ain't you 'shamed, you sleepy-head!"

(Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Child's Garden of Verses*, 1890)

As a teacher, no doubt, you want to evaluate what your students have written. However, it is important to remember several things. Nothing created can be right or wrong. Put away the red pencil! It has no place in creative writing. It is very important to use positive criticism in order to build confidence in the budding writer. Of course, the teacher needs to help students work towards grammatically correct final drafts. But mechanical corrections come last and they needn't be pencilled in red. Ideas, thoughts, emotions come first. Creative writing exposes the writer's soul; be sensitive to this.

You can use creative writing for observational assessment. Look for gains in students' language expression, confidence, abstract thinking, motivation and understanding of how to write, motivation to read and appreciation of literature. And remember this the next time you have a bad lesson in which you become balled up in right-wrong answers, incomplete work, misunderstood concepts, tense, unhappy faces ... put it away, and write a poem. The gains in learning will be just as real.

#### **References**

Steinbergh, J.W. (1991). To arrive in another world: Poetry, language development and culture. *Harvard Educational Review*, 61 (1), 51-70.

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