CREATIVE WRITING:
AN EXPERIENCE WITH LANGUAGE

by

Paula S. Carmean

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Theresa Hoshita
ADVISOR

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DATE
The Creative Process

It has been my experience that in the undertaking of a creative project, the thinking and planning involved in the early stages of creation take far more time than the subsequent manual effort which gives the creation substance. This was particularly true of the following paper.

Although I had little difficulty in selecting a topic for study—for the language arts have long been a special interest of mine and one that I think teachers need to know more about—I did experience a great deal of difficulty in deciding just what kind of a project to do. My initial decision was to write a formal research paper on the teaching of creative writing, perhaps supplementing this paper with a special section of original "writing-starter" ideas which I could use directly in the elementary classroom to stimulate student writing. However, I have always disliked following standard procedures for writing term papers and such because they frequently interfere with my verbal expression. Given the opportunity, I would much rather present the same basic information in a new or unusual way.

Nevertheless, it was some time before I had definitely decided not to write a standard term paper. (Luckily, the extensive research and note-taking I had already done in preparation for writing the term paper was just as essential to the formulation of the alternative project.) Even then, however, my plan of operation was rather vague. That is, I had gathered sufficient data and had formulated definite attitudes about the teaching of creative writing, but I still did not know exactly what kind of a written project could be both creative and academically sound.
Essentially, I came to the idea of a panel discussion through methods of trial-and-error and, later, modification and expansion of acceptable ideas. That is, I first tried writing a standard term paper. That approach was academically sound but stifled my creative expression. Then I tried writing a child's thoughts about writing in diary form. That approach was also inadequate. (It was creative, but I felt it sounded childish and unfounded.) Then I considered making up a letter, supposedly written by an elementary teacher, which would express concern about a number of issues involved in the teaching of creative writing. The rest of the paper was to serve as an answer to the teacher's queries. This approach seemed most acceptable to me, because not only would it be unusual in form and expression, but also it would be solidly based on the fundamental information I had gained from my research. It was at that point that I began to modify and expand my idea. I decided to have a number of fictitious teachers, rather than myself, present the information; to let a letter (or letters) serve indirectly, rather than directly, as a starting point for the paper; and to present the paper as an answer to the common problems of many elementary teachers, rather than to an individual's problems.

I have taken so much time to elaborate on the planning of this paper because it so closely parallels the process a student must follow in writing creatively. Whenever a student begins to write, he needs to spend a great deal of time in planning and organizing as well as in writing. The final product should be the result of his modification and expansion of rational decisions regarding such things as content, form, and mood that he initially has made.
Justification

The value of practical writing has long been recognized by elementary teachers. However, creative (or strictly imaginative) writing has not always been so regarded. I contend that there is value in teaching children to use their imaginations and to be sensitive to and observant of the world around them. Being creative can be relatively easy with practice and can be a highly enjoyable experience for students. It also aids students in the development of their thinking abilities, in that it teaches them to look at a problem in many ways and to feel free to try new things.

Solving the Dilemma

A teacher faces some very real problems when dealing with the subject of creative writing. For example, how can he fit creative writing into the already-crowded curriculum? How can he interest his students in writing? How can he individualize writing instruction? How should he evaluate his students' work? I decided to do research in the area of creative writing to perhaps clear up some of these problems for myself as a prospective teacher.

There are no hard-and-fast rules for the teaching of creative writing. The suggestions I have presented in the following paper are simply those that I feel have merit and are worth some consideration by elementary teachers. Because I realize that what sometimes will work for one teacher and his class may not work for another, I have tried to present a number of alternatives to each problem. Consequently, when I begin teaching, I should have a better chance of finding an approach to teaching writing that works well with my particular class.
Conclusion

What I have written in the following pages reflects to a great extent my personal thoughts about teaching, even though I have consulted a number of books and resources for material. I place strong emphasis on such things as the importance of creativity, a warm and accepting atmosphere in the classroom, teacher enthusiasm and recognition of student individuality, and student involvement in planning and evaluating activities.

Despite the similarity of my own ideas with my research material, however, I feel that writing this paper has been a learning experience for me. I have had at last a chance to analyze my own beliefs about teaching writing, to seek out and consider other viewpoints on the subject, and finally, to develop a comprehensive approach to teaching writing which I feel should work well with students.
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American Education magazine presents this publication in response to numerous requests from elementary teachers across the country to provide them with a practical and concise classroom guide for the teaching of creative writing.

To serve this end, we have enlisted the aid of four dedicated elementary teachers who have very definite ideas about the subject and have recorded their responses to a number of relevant questions. These teachers were selected on the basis of a preliminary written elimination. All entries were judged by the staff of our magazine.

We wish to thank all of the teachers who took the time and effort to submit applications to this project. We only hope that by preparing this publication we have in some way aided those teachers who have looked to us for assistance.

--The Editor
Contributing Teachers

Stephen A. Thompson  
Spring Valley Elementary School  
Hillsborough, California

Carol R. Hutchinson  
George Washington Elementary School  
Washington, D. C.

Julie Roberts  
Madison Elementary School  
Flint, Michigan

Lawrence P. Kirk  
Emerson Elementary School  
Denver, Colorado
"Creativeness is the birthright of children, and it will flower and mature with the years unless stunted by unimaginative teaching."
Q: What is your definition of creative writing?

MRS. HUTCHINSON: Creative writings are reflections of individuals. That is, the creative writer immerses himself in his writings, utilizing his unique personal experiences, knowledge, perceptions, and emotions as working materials. The main concern of creative writing is the transmission of an individual's thoughts and feelings for their own sake or for the entertainment of others, as opposed to those forms of writing which are concerned solely with the transmission of information.

MR. THOMPSON: Originality or novelty is generally considered an essential characteristic of creative writing. This criterion is not limited to the use of original ideas, however, but more to the extent that ideas are used in new or unusual ways. I accomplish this myself by selecting unusual forms for my writing—such as by writing a book review in the form of a newspaper human-interest story or an announcement in the form of a poem—, but original effects can be achieved as well by the way in which the material is organized, by the specific words that are selected, and by the use of personal perspective and insight in viewing a situation or phenomenon.

MISS ROBERTS: Creative writing may very well be purposeful and utilitarian. For example, "a letter may be so written that the imagination is used, the senses are stimulated, and an artistic word-picture is painted for the reader. This is creativity; it is also practical and quite effective communication."

MR. KIRK: Summarily, I would say that "if the writing is truly the individual's, if it shows a flash of something beyond the commonplace, it is creative."
Q: What are the objectives of creative writing?

MR. KNOX: Writing creatively exposes children to the joys of literature. Through writing, one hopes that children will develop an appreciation for colorful, vivid, and moving language and an increased sensitivity to beauty in general.

MRS. HUTCHINSON: Writing may serve as a constructive way for children to release their emotions. It may also give a child a sense of personal worth for himself and his contributions.

MISS ROBERTS: The emphasis in writing creatively should be on personal expression. Specifically, the teacher first seeks to interest his students in expressing themselves through writing and then, to help each student develop a suitable personal style in which to do it.

MR. THOMSON: A long-range objective of creative writing is to help students develop the skills and vocabulary to facilitate writing as a form of communication. Essentially, the teacher wants to make language a natural, functional process for his students.
Q: What part does the teacher play in helping children learn to appreciate writing?

MISS ROBERTS: Children cannot develop a deep appreciation for writing unless they recognize a legitimate reason for it. Thus, if writing is to be regarded as a valuable means for communication, it must be used to communicate with—letters must be mailed; plays must be typed up and distributed, read aloud, and/or tape-recorded; stories must be read aloud, displayed in the classroom, or published in a class newspaper; etc. 9

MR. KIRK: A positive attitude toward writing on the part of the teacher himself is critical to the development of an appreciation for writing among his students. The teacher can demonstrate his enthusiasm for writing by reading aloud a variety of writings that he enjoys to the class. He may even wish to share writing he has done for his own enjoyment with the class. If a teacher is genuinely enthusiastic about writing, his enthusiasm is bound to be contagious. As an additional benefit, if children are exposed to a wide variety of language, they can best develop a standard of reference by which to recognize quality writing.

MRS. HUTCHINSON: One thing a teacher must do in order to help his students develop an appreciation for writing is to accept the writing of his students. Each child includes a part of himself in his creations; consequently, if the creation is accepted, the child feels accepted as well.
How much preparation is necessary before children are able to begin a writing assignment?

MRS. HUTCHINSON: It is important for growth toward writing in general that children experience numerous oral language activities, especially in the primary grades. "...whether it (language) is richly personal or atomized and weak depends on the formative language experiences." For example, children should be encouraged to tell their own stories and stories they have heard from others, to take part in class discussions, to talk about experiences they have had, to give puppet plays and dramatizations, etc. Such activities not only provide valuable practice in using language for self-expression but also can give a child a sense of identity and personal worth. Depending upon the attitude of the teacher, the child has the opportunity to realize that what he knows, what he has experienced, what he likes and dislikes, and what he wonders about are important to someone else besides himself.

"The child whose experience has built in him a sense of adequacy and of personal worth will progress faster, regardless of intelligence, than will the child who thinks less well of himself and his capacity to contribute something of worth."  

MR. THOMPSON: A prerequisite to writing is having something to say. Not all children are able to respond adequately to a proposal to "write about anything you want". Teacher guidance is necessary to help students stir up a variety of ideas for writing from which the students may then select. The teacher may accomplish this objective in many ways. For example, he may present a stimulus--by reading a selection from a book, by playing a tape or a record, or by showing a film or picture, etc.--to the class and then ask for their reactions. In addition, an experience of a particular student, an experience of the class as a whole, or even a question brought up by a student may form the basis of an oral discussion--and hence, become a suitable subject for writing. Writing ideas drawn from all areas of the curriculum may--and should--be utilized as well. The stirring up of ideas should immediately precede each writing period, although the time spent in discussion will vary depending upon the students and the subject matter used.

MR. KIRK: Some time should be allotted students for thinking and planning as well as for writing. Therefore, the time period set aside for writing needs to be flexible, depending on the teacher's judgment.
0: What standards should be used for evaluating student writing?

MISS ROBERTS: If we determine the purpose of creative writing to be self-expression, we should be interested in analyzing the value of the writing in relation to the child. That is, personal writing should be regarded as well done if the child feels he has said what he wanted to say as well as he could. The child definitely should be included in the evaluation process.

MRS. HUTCHINSON: I agree that the emphasis of evaluation should be placed on the child. "The real values in creative writing lie in what is happening to the child, not in the story, poem, or play he has produced. If the child is growing in depth of thinking, in imaginative creation, in respect for the worth of his own ideas, and in ability to be himself, then the work is good regardless of the quality of what is written." 8

MR. THOMSON: All students should be regarded as potentially creative to various degrees. Therefore, I believe that writing exercises should be designed so that children are encouraged to experiment with ideas and language. In this case, I recommend evaluation of imaginative writing strictly on the basis of creativity or originality. For example, judgment of originality for stories might be determined from such characteristics as use of vivid words or creation of new words, use of unusual or rare names for characters, unusual plot, the invention of new objects or devices as part of the plot, etc. 9
Q: The pressure of grading seems to stifle some of the enthusiasm that children have for writing. How might a teacher alleviate this problem?

MISS ROBERTS: If evaluation in the form of a grade is necessary, as it is in most schools, it is possible solely to use practical writing experiences as a basis of judgment. Imaginative writing may be considered satisfactory when it is satisfactory to the child and can be utilized to help children develop the language skills needed in their practical writing.

MR. KIRK: The involvement of students in the evaluation process, which allows students to discover and analyze their own errors, should eliminate some of the frustration which can result from red-marked papers returned to students with little or no explanation from the teacher. If students do not have a clear idea of the reasons their writings are in error, they have no way of knowing what weaknesses to work on in order to improve their writing in general. They inevitably feel helpless and may even give up trying to do better work when they have no control over changing their grades. The student tends to produce better work when he is writing about something which is meaningful to him rather than about something which is not meaningful. Likewise, he should produce better work when he has had a hand in analyzing his own mistakes and in deciding how he might improve what he has written than if he is totally divorced from the evaluation process. When children have a better chance to do good work, they should experience more enthusiasm for trying to write.
Q: A few of you have emphasized student involvement in the evaluation process. How might this be accomplished?

MR. TAYLOR: The class may be guided by the teacher to develop flexible standards by which the students can evaluate their writing on an individual basis. These standards will vary for different forms of writing—poetry, short stories, etc. Standards can be determined by an analysis of errors the students have made previously in their writing and should be inaccessible with respect to the children's abilities. Examples of a few of the standards set for short stories by one of my former classes are the following: "Does my story have a good beginning?", "Does my story show a reader what the story idea is?", "Did I tell my story in sequence?", and "Did I use new and interesting voices?".

MR. ROSS: I have found that children are also capable of evaluating one another effectively, provided there is an atmosphere of acceptance in the class and that children's judgments are respected. In using this particular method of evaluation, it is wise to avoid emphasizing minor flaws; instead, concentrate on the positive. For example, ask the students, "What did you like about Jim's story?".

MR. KIT: Individual student-teacher conferences are one of the best ways I know of involving students in the evaluation process. My procedure is this: When I read a student's paper for the first time, I read it all the way through without making any marks on it. Then determine what I feel is the best characteristic of the writing; and I mark this on a separate sheet of paper, along with any major errors I have noted. When it is convenient, I draw students aside individually for brief conferences. I begin each conference by complimenting the student on the characteristic I have deemed best about his writing. (I am honest about this, but I believe that each student needs to feel a certain amount of success.) Then I have the student read his paper aloud to me in such a way as not to greatly disturb the rest of the class. When the student has finished reading, I ask him if he feels he has said what he was trying to say and if there is any way he might change his paper to make it more effective. Because the student has read his paper aloud, he is more likely to have noticed such errors as omissions, fragments, and incorrect punctuation than he would have noticed by any silent proofreading he did before handing the paper in. As a result, he may be more inclined to note such errors in his future writing. In addition, by having the student read his own paper and by talking to him directly, the teacher can get a better idea of exactly what the student was trying to say. Of course, this method of evaluation is greatly time-consuming, but the benefits derived from the one-to-one contact between the student and teacher and from the opportunity for the student to have a hand in evaluating his own work and to feel some success at writing will more than make the effort worthwhile.
Q: In what way can the teacher individualize instruction in creative writing?

MR. THOMPSON: Aside from the individual student-teacher conferences I have just mentioned, I keep folders containing samples of each child's writing which I analyze periodically for such things as persistent errors as well as for signs of improvement in expression and technique. It is not always possible time-wise, but I try to confer with the child afterwards about my findings.

MISS ROTHES: I, too, keep track of the most common errors which are made in my students' writings. From time-to-time, on the basis of this information, I offer direct instruction to the class about a specific kind of error. There is no need to waste time going over and over material with which students are proficient. The teacher must remember that each class is unique and has unique problems and needs.

MISS HUTCHINSON: This kind of "after-the-fact" instruction can result as well from the analysis of errors children make on occasional proofreading or self-editing practice activities.

MR. THOMPSON: I attempt to individualize instruction by maintaining flexible grouping among my students. That is, I group children occasionally according to their needs, interests, or abilities to help one another. I have found that when children work as a group on particular language skills, they tend to learn a great deal from one another as well as to apply what they have learned to their future writing.
Q: How can a teacher fit creative writing into the already-crowded curriculum? That is, how can he find time for writing?

MR. THOMPSON: It is easy to combine the creative writing period and that of any other subject in the curriculum when writing ideas are drawn from the specific subject area. Reading, in particular, lends itself to this type of arrangement. For example, a student might be asked to choose his favorite story character and to pretend he meets this character somewhere. The student would then be asked to write down what he and the character talked about. For a social studies lesson, one teacher I know asked her students to assume the roles of former Presidents of the United States and to write letters to the American public about the problems facing an incumbent with respect to today's troublesome times. This activity required the use of research skills as well as a great deal of thinking, planning, and imagination. The possibilities for integrating creative writing and other subject areas are practically endless.

MISS ROBERTS: The teacher can provide more time for creative writing if he does not restrict writing only to those times when the entire class is free. There is no reason why a few students cannot be writing while the rest of the class is working on something else.

MR. HUTCHINSON: The time period set aside for writing needs to be flexible. If something particularly unusual happens during the day or if some unforeseen opportunity for writing should arise, then it should be taken advantage of as it occurs in order not to lose the stimulation and excitement of the moment. "Teachers who want their children to write always manage to find some way to make time for it."
Q: Do you have any additional suggestions about teaching creative writing which were not covered by our questions?

MRS. THOMPSON: There are so many types of creative writing--skits, plays, jokes and riddles, fables and myths, diaries, letters, poems, and short stories. Don't limit children's writing to just one form--say, short stories--just because you feel more comfortable teaching it. Writing should involve experimentation on the part of the teacher as well as on the part of the students.

MRS. HUTCHINSON: Be sure to let students be themselves in their writing. In effect, tell students to "put it in your own words", and mean what you say. Don't encourage students only to give back what you wanted to hear. "When writing is examined for quality, personal writing is superior. The experience and motivation of the child in such a situation produce writing that is more sincere, possesses more feeling, is richer in detail, more pleasing in style, and utilizes more complex sentence structure."
FOOTNOTES

1Nichman, Smith, and Butterfield; Teaching the Language Arts; p. 214.

2Ibid., p. 211.

3Petty and Bowen, Silhery Snakes and Other Aids to Children's Writing, p. 276.


5Zirbes, "Why Write", op. 3-5.

6Smith, Goodman, and Meredith; Language and Thinking in the Elementary School; p. 8.

7Strickland, The Language Arts in the Elementary School, p. 312.

8Ibid., p. 351.

9Carlson, Sparkling Words, p. 196.

10Petty and Bowen, p. 86.

11Nichman, Smith, and Butterfield; p. 221.

12Applegate, Helping Children Write, pp. 105-6.

13Henderson, "If I Returned...", p. 32.

14Petty and Bowen, p. 12.

15Hughes, "Relationship of Maturation to Writing", p. 14.
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