CREATIVE COMPOSITION IN HIGH SCHOOL

The creative ability of which one hears and reads so much, and which some may think is a recent development in education, is really as old as life itself. “It was fundamental in the past, it is fundamental today in all efficient teaching and all learning processes. There can be no real education unless it is creative.”

When a child has learned not to stick his hand in the fire he has created a new way of thinking about the fire. The creative impulse is more easily recognized in young children, but the artisan who fashions a beautiful piece of work after a design of his own, uses it; the minister who develops the spiritual life of his parish practices it. In short, whenever adjustments are made among individuals, this gift is used. “It is something more than a product in clay or canvas: it is dancing, rhythmic living, a laugh, a flash of the mind, strength of control, swiftness of action, an unwritten poem, a song without words,” and our lives are “artistic or dull in proportion to our creative gifts.”

Before going further it might be well to state that the majority of authorities on “creative composition” accept the psychological point of view as a basis for classifying creative work, which places emphasis on the process rather than on the finished product—a new thought, a new idea, a new analysis. Whenever an individual reacts in a different way, Professor Kilpatrick says, an act of creation takes place. Should one accept the sociological point of view, only the great masters would be recognized as possessing creative ability, and there would be little need to spend time on creative composition in the high school. While it is true that few pupils are endowed with originality, all possess to a greater or less degree the power to create. “Each new sentence is a creation and to many progressive teachers creative composition emphasizes the degree to which an individual has contributed his personal feeling or thinking to the sentence or paragraph.”

Even nature furnishes countless illustrations of creative composition: no one knows why the robin sings, but we can take down the motif of his song. What mathematician does not wonder at the geometrical pattern of the spider’s web or the paper apartment of the “yellow-jacket” that some inner urge has caused him to create? Nature has many artists that demonstrate beauty in keeping with their uses and purposes. Man follows that same inner urge which soon becomes a desire. The desire is changed to an idea which causes him to collect his materials and compose something that serves his needs and purposes. Creative composition is thus “the act and product of arranging, relating, organizing, rebuilding materials already possessed or purposefully sought and secured.” This definition of creative composition applies suitably to the high school pupil whose material is words, which he uses to express his feelings, as well as the phases of life in which he is

1McKittrick, May—“Creative Writing in the New Era.” The English Journal (c. e.) April, 1934, p. 298-302.
4In direct opposition to this standard for creative composition Prof. White, of Hunter College, makes the following statement (Education, September 1936): “But I, for one, refuse to accept the idea that any type of writing styled ‘creative’, or that any collection of ink-and-paper gibberish—however creative or liberal it may be—should be blithely labeled writing.”
interested and with which he has had direct 
or vicarious experience.\textsuperscript{6}

\textbf{Objectives}

Since one of the major emphases of edu-
cation is placed upon recognition and de-
velopment of individual differences among 
pupils, and since a great majority of pro-
gressive teachers of English are willing to 
place creative composition on a broader 
basis, accepting other types of minds and 
other native abilities beside those of the 
rare artist, this subject provides a surpris-
ing number of objectives for the English 
teacher and his pupil to work for.

Some pupils write because the teacher 
makes an assignment, while others have it 
in them and can’t help it—like the pupil in 
the Lincoln High School of whom Profes-
sor Mearns writes: “She said she had a 
poem in her and that if she had to stay in 
this room another minute without writing 
it she would scream!”\textsuperscript{7}

For the timid pupils free, creative writ-
ing has a social and remedial value. They 
are afraid to have their thoughts and ex-
periences read before others, for fear they 
are abnormal or individual, but class dis-
cussion proves they have been common to 
many. Miss La Brant\textsuperscript{8} says she finds “Do 
not read my name in class” on as many as 
a fourth of the papers coming to her. She 
adds further that usually the child makes 
known his authorship before the class is 
over.

For the pupils who have “the itch to 
write” creative composition provides an 
outlet for creative energy and emotional 
release; at the same time it stimulates ob-
servation and develops imagination. The 
product of this energy can be utilized by 
the school newspaper and the high school 
literary magazine in the form of editorials, 
essays, poems, short stories, book reports.

The purpose of creative writing in high 
school is not to develop great writers; but 
through these courses and the thoughtful 
guidance of the teacher, some pupils may 
later enter the field of journalism, or their 
energy and ambitions may be directed into 
other channels best suited to their interests. 
Many a person has freed his emotions in 
writing letters, and whether it is done for 
pay or pleasure, the more imagination and 
spontaneity one uses, while sacrificing none 
of the conventions, the better.

“A wholesome development in the field 
of creative composition is opening up as a 
result of the photoplay-appreciation move-
ment. Teachers who at first resented the 
intrusion of photoplay in the English 
courses are finding that it is leading to a 
greater interest in the arts as well as serv-
ing as a basis for motivating imaginative 
writing.”\textsuperscript{9}

A few years back, training students to 
make a living was one of the major object-
ives of education. The value of the un-
trained person, of the high school graduate, 
and of the college graduate was computed 
in dollars and cents, but we are more and 
more forced to admit that students must re-
cieve some education for leisure. Most 
students will have more leisure time on their 
hands than our grandparents ever dreamed 
of. “It is this new leisure that will make 
or mar them, according to how it is spent 
or misspent.”\textsuperscript{10}

To some older teachers all of this em-
phasis on creative writing means but one 
thing—a failure to acquire necessary skills, 
and neglect of rules of grammar and rhe-
toric. Investigation, however, supports the 
opinion that creative composition “offers an 
ideal medium for the development of cor-
rect sentence structure, punctuation, and 
form—all learning is determined by mean-
ings within the individual experience. We 

\textsuperscript{6}“The one indispensable talent for creative art, 
whether of the theatre or literature or music 
or plastic representation, is the talent for ex-
periencing.”—Mary Austin.

\textsuperscript{7}Mearns, Hughes—\textit{Creative Youth}, p. 14.

\textsuperscript{8}La Brant, Lou L.—op. cit.

\textsuperscript{9}Lewin, William—“Amateur Photoplay Compo-

\textsuperscript{10}Royster, Salibelle—“The New Leisure Chal-
enges the English Curriculum.” \textit{The English 
Journal} (h. s.) April, 1936 p. 297.
understand, therefore, why it is that our drills and exercises in writing have such a transitory effect and have failed to carry over to out-of-class writing. . . Creative composition furnishes a situation in which the pupil provides the motivation for correct structure, for clarity and good form. There is a true check of accuracy, the check of real experience.”

Sentence structure and vocabulary problems which the teacher sets up lack motivation and often are not really the problems of the majority of the pupils.

Ruskin voiced an important objective of creative composition when he said, “The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell in a plain way what it saw.” Students must learn to be close observers; they must acquire sound ideas and the ability to use these ideas for a definite purpose. Lincoln clearly demonstrated these points when he is reported to have said, in one of his debates with Douglas, “I know what I mean and I do not propose to leave this crowd in doubt!”

Much has been done in the schools toward recognizing individual needs and interests; educators are constantly using, with much emphasis, the terms “child-centered,” “interests of the learner,” “life situations,” etc.; all kinds of tests and every available method, however, will have to be used to discover and develop individual capabilities and native tendencies. When this is done there still remains what is possibly the highest objective to be attained—that of using these developed instincts and abilities in solving our social problems. “Youth must be made to realize that its sharpened powers should be used in cooperation with others in an effort to eradicate social evils—ignorance, poverty, disease, crime, low ideals.”

We must set up a plan in the English classes that will give more time to creative thinking. The pupils must acquire a knowledge of our social problems and be able to do something toward their solution. Of course, English classes cannot take over the content of the social studies, but “creative thinking along social lines” can be encouraged and clarified in the English classroom. “At present there is too much time given to the technique of writing, and most high school students do not know how to find material within their own experience for creative thinking. English should be so taught as to preserve all that is creative in the individual and at the same time prepare him to take part in the new social order,” Miss McKitrick asserts. In this way he will be fitted “to act with and for others while he learns to think and judge for himself.” As all teachers realize, these objectives cannot be attained overnight, but by persistent and consistent effort, surprising results may be obtained.

 Procedures

Charles Hilton says the creative writing process cannot be taught: “No one but God can create the necessary link in the chain between knowledge and its appreciation. . . Either the student has the capacity to apply what is taught, or he hasn’t, but it can be studied.” Another writer says that creative writing “cannot be taught but can be caught.” Whether one approves of either statement, it is clear that the success of such a course depends largely upon an understanding teacher. His sincerity and enthusiasm, as well as his ability to teach, are taken for granted. H. Robinson Shipherd glorifies the work of such a teacher when he says to the composition teacher: “You are not task masters; you are mental and spiritual gardeners, nourishing, watering, fostering the most exquisite and the most

11LaBrant, Lou L.—op. cit.
12McKitrick—“Creative Writing in the New Era.” The English Journal (c. e.) April, 1934. p. 298-302.
miraculous growths and unfoldings it is ever given us to see, and God gives the increase... Much is required of us, but to us much is given. On the teacher, then, rests the responsibility of establishing an atmosphere that is conducive to real creative effort. He must stimulate boys and girls so that they will discover the materials and interests they possess or may develop, and at the same time he must be business manager for the group.

The conference plan is used by some teachers, and Professor Shipherd says no decent composition teaching can be done otherwise. In this way all formality will be eliminated. Some classes elect a chairman who works with the teacher in making plans for the group. The atmosphere of a club should prevail. Where it can be had, a pleasant room that is strictly private is a great advantage; it should be furnished with a suitable table, at which the teacher sits with the pupils. This method does several things: it breaks down imaginary barriers between teacher and pupils; it makes the work a joint adventure which formal education has almost destroyed. "There must be freedom of expression; no spirit of discouragement. Care should be given that only constructive, helpful criticism and appreciation be employed by the teacher. There must be no compulsion. Creative work should never be assigned. Opportunities for writing must be provided, and an atmosphere that will encourage it. There must be a reason or a need for the story, the play, or the poem, and appreciation and enjoyment of the result. Technique comes as a means of expression."

Some periods can be spent in having rhythmical prose, poetry, or other forms of literature read and discussed; sometimes an interest can be aroused by reading poems that might suggest experiences of their own. The children might be asked to write in one sentence what the poem brought to their minds; a picture, an experience, or a sense impression, or some interesting thought about life? The best sentence should be read to the class and reasons given by the teacher for his choice. An informal discussion of the forms of poetry—avoiding technical terms—might well be brought out at this point. Another method of helping the class to write interesting sentences is to give a list of words asking them to write what these words make them think of. "By writing we shall simultaneously develop possessed skill, interests, and capacities, stimulate growth in creative and interpretative powers, and understandingly and purposefully eradicate destructive habits. In other words, our written-expression work will be at once corrective, formatve, and resultant in creative effort. It must attain these ends together if it would achieve them at all. We cannot correct and then employ. We cannot form and correct and later create: we must form and correct in the process of creation."

Maxwell J. Littwin suggests the use of three methods that have proved helpful in his work: (1) Picture study lessons; (2)...
Literary model lessons; (3) Sense training lessons.

Keeping class notebooks of the best creative work increases the interest of the class in attempting original writing of their own. Those examples of essays to be studied should be selected on the basis of being within the experience of the group. Essays may be analyzed to note the personal touch, or the choice of words, or the turn of a phrase.

Pupils can be asked to give just one vivid experience, and the best parts of their essays can be copied on the board. This is a help in improving their prose technique. "Teachers have always drawn on the personal experiences and observations of pupils for creative ability, but approaching this through the medium of literature has led to a more artistic and vivid expression of the pupil's experience and ideas."20

Among certain materializing forces for securing creative work that may be used to advantage is reading; more nearly than any other activity, it widens the scope of human experience. It is so important that some wise educators make it a thing to be enjoyed—not a duty. Shelley said in his defense of poetry that it "is the record of the happiest moments of the happiest and best minds." Reading sharpens a young writer's senses and causes his imagination to become productive. Wide reading alone will not make a writer, but if one looks into the background of the best writers, he will find they have all been omnivorous readers. Nicholas Murray Butler goes so far as to say that "The only way to teach young people to write good English is to teach them to read good English," but Shipherd claims "that the truth is midway: to read, then to write, then to read, and then to write—both; persistently, unwearied." But at the other extreme stands Thomas H. Uzzell, who insists: "I do not believe that reading should ever be used in any classroom to stimulate the imagination. This use of reading by teachers and by students themselves, in their own efforts at creative writing, has produced thousands of baffled, paralyzed, often despairing failures, who, before they can succeed, must somehow be turned from books and magazines to life, their own lives, as sources of both inspiration and material."21

"In every human being," Robert Henri says, "there is the artist, and whatever his activity, he has an equal chance with anyone to express the result of his growth and his contact with life. . . . I don't believe any real artist cares whether what he does is 'art' or not. Who, after all, knows what is art? I think the real artists are too busy with just being and growing and acting (on canvasses or however) like themselves, to worry about the end. The end will be what it will be. The object is intense living, fulfillment, the great happiness in creation."

But however creative writing may be, it must be worked at consistently, Robert Louis Stevenson believed. Of the painters at Barbizon, he said: "My job is like theirs. Every day they go at their work, their job, not waiting for inspiration or mood or even for subject. Something, a little, everyday; the result is mountainous!"

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20Wright, Mildred—"Suggestions for Creative Writing." The English Journal (c. e.) September 1932. p. 338-42.