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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."[1] 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."[2]

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."[3,4]

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."[5] 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

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[1]McKitrick, May—"Creative Writing in the New Era." *The English Journal* (c. e.) April, 1934, p. 298-302.

[2]Mearns, Hughes—*Creative Expression.* "The Creative Spirit and its Significance for Education."

[3]La Brant, Lou L.—"The Psychological Basis for Creative Writing." *The English Journal* (h. s.) 1936. pp. 292-301.

[4]In 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."

[5]Seely—*On Teaching English* p. 225.

interested and with which he has had direct or vicarious experience.[6]

Objectives

Since one of the major emphases of education is placed upon recognition and development of individual differences among pupils, and since a great majority of progressive 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 surprising 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 Professor 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!"[7]

For the timid pupils free, creative writing has a social and remedial value. They are afraid to have their thoughts and experiences read before others, for fear they are abnormal or individual, but class discussion proves they have been common to many. Miss La Brant[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 observation 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 movement. 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 serving as a basis for motivating imaginative writing."[9]

A few years back, training students to make a living was one of the major objectives of education. The value of the untrained 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 receive 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."[10]

To some older teachers all of this emphasis on creative writing means but one thing—a failure to acquire necessary skills, and neglect of rules of grammar and rhetoric. Investigation, however, supports the opinion that creative composition "offers an ideal medium for the development of correct sentence structure, punctuation, and form—all learning is determined by meanings within the individual experience. We

[6]"The one indispensable talent for creative art, whether of the theatre or literature or music or plastic representation, is the talent for experiencing"—Mary Austin.

[7]Mearns, Hughes—*Creative Youth,* p. 14.

[8]La Brant, Lou L.—*op. cit.*

[9]Lewin, William—"Amateur Photoplay Composition." *Education,* September, 1936. pp. 27-30.

[10]Royster, Salibelle—"The New Leisure Challenges the English Curriculum." *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."[11] 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."[12] 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."[13] As all teachers realize, these objectives cannot be attained over night, 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.*"[14] Another writer says that creative writing "cannot be taught but can be caught."[15] 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

[11]LaBrant, Lou L.—*op. cit.*

[12]McKitrick—"Creative Writing in the New Era." *The English Journal* (c. e.) April, 1934. p. 298-302.

[13]Dewey, John—*New York Times.* October 25, 1931.

[14]Hilton, Charles—"Objectives for Creative Writing." *The English Journal.* (h. s.) March, 1933. p. 223-9.

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."[15] 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."[16]

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.[17] 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, formative, and resultant in creative effort. It must attain these ends *together* if it would achieve them at all. We cannot develop and then use; we must develop while using. We cannot correct and then employ. We cannot form and correct and later create: we must form and correct in the process of creation.[18]

Maxwell J. Littwin[19] suggests the use of three methods that have proved helpful in his work: (1) Picture study lessons; (2)

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[15]Shipherd, H. Robinson—*The Fine Art of Writing.* p. 18.

[16]English, Mildred—"Creative Writing in the Middle Grades." *Education.* November 1932. p. 133-7.

[17]"Should all students, regardless of mental attainments, be included in this training? For the purpose of literary appreciation, yes. If a student is capable of reading literature he has the right to the increased appreciation which this procedure will produce; what he attains beyond that is purely a matter of his intelligence and inclination. In schools where homogeneous grouping is employed for purposes of better instruction, the production of creative writing of poetic value will come from the sections of high mentality." Ward H. Green: "Creative Verse in the Senior High School." *Education.* November, 1932. pp. 146-52.

[18]Seely, Howard F. *On Teaching English.* p. 270.

[19]Details of these methods may be found in *The English Journal* (h. s.) *October,* 1935: "Three Methods of Developing Imagination in Pupils' Writing."

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!"

JENNY LIND SHIRLEY

[20] Wright, Mildred—"Suggestions for Creative Writing." *The English Journal* (c. e.) September 1932. p. 538-42.

[21] Uzzell, Thomas—"Creative Writing: A Professional View." *The English Journal* (c. e.) January, 1935. p. 10-17.

Books are the quietest and most constant of friends; they are the most accessible and wisest of counsellors, and the most patient of teachers.—CHARLES W. ELIOT.

There is one trouble with relatives. They know the worst of us in advance. And generally they are painfully candid.—FRED B. BARTON.