

Teaching Writing in Today's Classrooms: Looking Back to Look Forward

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Imaginative children's literature, educational drama and creative writing

Robyn Ewing, Jackie Manuel and Amy Mortimer

The authors of this chapter present two concrete examples of creative pedagogy illustrating how it can foster students' creative writing and, in turn, enable them to explore their creative potential.

Introduction

Creative expression, in whatever form it takes, is a dance. This dance between conscious and unconscious, creator and critic ... results in something original and often surprising. (Messer, 2001, pp. 1–2)

Strong creative thinking and learning skills, attributes and understandings are critical to students' social and emotional wellbeing, academic achievement (Catterall, 2009; Craft, 2005; Winner, Goldstein & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013) and lifelong learning. Creative learners generate resilient, positive attitudes towards change and ongoing learning (National Education Association, 2012). More recent definitions of creativity, sometimes called 'second generation' creativity (McWilliam, 2009) emphasise dynamic, collaborative and multi-faceted creative processes and products which are so important if our children are to understand and manage the complexities and increasingly accelerated change that will characterise their whole lives.

The relationship between creativity and the Arts is acknowledged by western education systems internationally and nationally (e.g., National Education Association, 2012; President's Committee on Arts and Humanities, 2011; Melbourne Declaration, 2008; ACARA, 2011) and should prompt education researchers and educators to reconceptualise and reformulate traditional notions of learning and teaching to support

the implementation of creative pedagogies in classrooms at every stage of education.

Despite these policy and curriculum emphases, there are few coherent understandings of what constitutes creativity at the classroom learning level (Jones & Flint, 2013; Robinson, 2011; Thomson & Sefton-Green, 2011) and there has been no consistent, robust and readily implementable set of understandings relating to pedagogy and learning processes to support the development of students' creativity. In the face of the need for schools and schooling to respond to changes in society generally, pedagogy must be reframed creatively using quality arts processes and experiences (Ewing, 2010; Gibson & Ewing, 2011).

The creative writing process and the classroom

... the defining aspect of knowing through art ... is the emanation of meaning through the process of creative expression. (Cole & Knowles, 2009, p. 40)

Creativity connotes originality, imagination, expressiveness (Hoyt, 2002) and risk-taking. When thinking about *creative* writing, then we must also think about flexibility and new or divergent ways of expressing ourselves through written text by stretching more conventional ways of writing, and by expanding our ideas to help develop new ways of thinking about the world.. For these reasons, to write creatively often requires us to overcome our reservations about writing 'correctly'. It can thus encourage us to develop self-confidence. Anna Craft (2001, 2005) suggests that creative students:

- are challenged by their goals, operations, and tasks
- take initiatives to search for relevant information
- interact with others
- meet new ideas with support and encouragement
- put forward new ideas and views
- debate their ideas openly
- tolerate uncertainty, and
- take risks.

This chapter particularly focuses on creative writing as a literary art form, which can and should be used to nurture children's creativity and imagination and the life-long skills and dispositions that are embedded within it. We celebrate the writing and research of Donald Graves whose work was highly significant for the teaching of writing and for Australian teachers in the 1980s. Graves (1983, 1994) stressed that the process of writing was about communication. He emphasised that teachers must work on their own creative writing as well as provide opportunities for their students. Graves advocated four essential elements to success on both counts:

1. the adequate provision of time (he suggested at least 4 days per week)
2. the individual child's choice of writing topic
3. responding to meaning first when looking at writing to provide feedback
4. the establishment of a community of learners.

Each of these is elaborated in more detail below in relation to two concrete examples that develop these conditions: using drama with quality literature, and developing creativity through creative writing at *Sydney Story Factory* (SSF). The implications for classrooms writing pedagogy are also explored.

It is of concern that the teaching of writing in many Australian schools in the 1990s and 2000s began to move away from creative writing, foregrounding instead the 'mastery' of different text types, the importance of grammar, punctuation and correct spelling and inevitably, associated technical assessment strategies. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some early childhood and primary classrooms creative writing has all but disappeared. And while we would agree that traditional writing skills are fundamental for all students, it is clear that the digital age has brought many additional demands.

As three educators committed to creative English and literacy pedagogy, we believe it is also essential to ensure that students enjoy the writing process, have opportunities to choose what they write for themselves and see it as a meaningful tool for development of self and learning – about

their identity, their thinking and their creative potential. Conceptualised in this way it is clear that classroom opportunities for creative writing can enhance children's literacy levels, confidence and self-efficacy (and therefore enhance their future employment potential). For example, Deegan's (2010) Californian study revealed a strong articulated connection between confidence in adolescent girls' creative writing skills and their confidence in other areas, as well as a link between the development of creative confidence and participation.

For teachers, an understanding of creativity and creative arts pedagogy allows them to develop and facilitate activities and experiences that require students to collate, interrogate and transform their prior learning over time as they combine it with new knowledge and skills to create something different. Pedagogical conditions that effectively foster creativity in the classroom include:

- ensuring adequate space and time for deep exploration/ investigation
- encouraging collaborative tasks: when collaborating students must exchange ideas about the tasks
- involving learners in higher level thinking skills
- fostering learners' self-esteem and self-worth
- providing information about and mentoring in creative approaches
- encouraging the expression and representation of ideas in a range of different media
- providing learners with opportunities to engage in dialogue about their ideas, to disagree with each other and justify their perspectives
- encouraging authentic interdisciplinary integration of subject areas via topics that are meaningful and relevant to the learner (Gibson & Ewing, 2011).

The following two sections describe how creative pedagogy can impact on creative writing through a brief exploration of the impact of drama and quality literature on students' confidence to write creatively and the evidence emerging about the development of creativity through creative writing at *Sydney Story Factory*.

Drama, quality literature and creative writing

In their important OECD report Winner et al. (2013) examined the extent to which arts in education foster skills such as critical and creative thinking, self-confidence, motivation, cooperation and the ability to communicate. One of their strongest findings underlines that opportunities for students to engage in enactment through classroom drama strengthens reading, writing and text understanding.

Over the last thirty years it has been Robyn Ewing's privilege to work alongside primary teachers interested in using educational drama strategies to explore quality or authentic children's literature to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes in English and literacy (Ewing, Miller & Saxton, 2008). Literature often goes unacknowledged as an art form. Her evaluation of research about creative writing for the then NSW Department of Education and Training (Ewing, 2002) concluded that opportunities for students to engage deeply with quality children's literature provided exemplary models for their own creative writing.

In Ewing's experience, two focus areas that teachers are often concerned about include narrative and descriptive writing. Teachers often comment that, while children quickly develop some skill in sequencing events, they find it more difficult to develop descriptive writing about places and people. Another challenge for children is characterisation. Students frequently depend on familiar plot structures and dilemmas and use 'safe' resolutions to conclude their stories. The following example of the potential of using drama with a literary text to help students develop more confidence in the creative writing process took place in a suburban Sydney Grade 5 class in October-November 2014. The class teacher was concerned that, although the students were very able, they often sought to write and problem solve in 'safe' or conventional ways using traditional 'recipes'. She was keen for them to stretch their boundaries and explore their creative potential through their writing. Ewing decided to use Shaun Tan's (2013) award-winning *Rules of Summer* as the key text. Those familiar with it will know that it is not a linear narrative but a sequenced set of paintings together with a brief caption. Tan writes:

For me this is kind of a good way of metaphorically examining a lot of things that happen in childhood. I don't feel that they can be directly explained ...
 Retrieved from: http://www.rulesofsummer.com.au/downloads/Rules_Rabbit_transcript.pdf

Further, Tan comments that he is keen for the reader to explore the relationship between the two young male characters and imagine what is happening.

The drama unit was designed to encourage students to make some topic choices of their own, creating their own exaggerated rules and consequences through focusing on a particular painting that resonated with them. A range of drama strategies including capturing moments in time through freeze frames (or tableau), hot-seating or questioning in role, mantle of the expert, teacher in role, and improvisation were used over the four weeks when Ewing worked with the class. These drama strategies enabled the students to embody particular moments, consider different perspectives, play with possibilities and explore 'what if'. They were released from the 'guess what's in the teacher's head' discourse.

After the drama workshop, some kind of writing and/or drawing task was set, and the class teacher provided time and space for the students to undertake this during the ensuing week. (For the complete unit see Ewing & Saunders, in press.) Other dramas based on the book have also been developed by Gattenhof (2014) and Warhurst (2014), and Tan's website also has many ideas that provide an excellent starting point.

At the beginning of the unit, for example, when the students were asked to share and then embody a rule that was important to them and to follow this by depicting the consequences, they were quick to use a school or home rule or a well-known precept rather than create one. Over the timeframe both the class teacher and Ewing observed the students slowly moving to a more risk-taking frame of mind, becoming more motivated to really engage and to think outside the square. They were obviously feeling (and enjoying) more freedom because they began to experiment with their own ideas and feelings. Another teacher colleague who chose to do the workshop alongside the students also shared his writing with the students at various stages and this was again an encouragement for them: the teacher exploring his own

writing and being prepared to share his ideas had a real impact on building the students' own confidence. More and more students were prepared over the unit to share their writing and were keen to receive both 'warm' (positive) and 'cool' (concerns or suggestions regarding improvement) feedback in pairs or small groups from both teachers and peers. Pajares & Valiente (2006) have demonstrated how important it is for individuals to be able to connect success with their own effort and capability.

This brief example demonstrates that we must take the time to develop enthusiasm for the writing task itself and that it is essential to build the participants' self-efficacy about their potential for success in such a task. It also resonates with Bandura's (1997) work on self-efficacy: individuals must feel they have the ability to achieve at a certain level and this will affect how much effort they will invest in a task. It was also clear that at the beginning of the unit the students were a little surprised that they were given so much autonomy in making choices about their writing. By the end, they were enjoying the time and space to think beyond the conventional writing constraints.

Sydney Story Factory

Inspired by the writing centre *826 Valencia* in San Francisco, *Sydney Story Factory* (SSF) was incorporated in 2011 and opened the doors of the Martian Embassy in Redfern in 2012. Seven more 'chapters' of *826 Valencia* have since opened across the US – in 2011–12 these served nearly 32,000 students. In London in late 2010, novelist Nick Hornby opened *The Ministry of Stories*, behind Hoxton Street Monster Supplies, following a similar model. SSF brings this model to Australia, focusing specifically on creative writing.

SSF is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to nurture children's creativity and wellbeing through sustained individual attention to their writing. Over 800 volunteer tutors offer one-on-one or small group support to children involved in free, term-long after school workshops designed to engage students in enjoyable, meaningful and purposeful creative writing. Ultimately these stories are published in various ways. In addition, workshops are offered in schools and during school holidays. Many different kinds of storying (Lowe, 2002) workshops are offered and tailored for different age ranges from early primary to late secondary. Other creative art

forms are often embedded in the workshops. All workshops have purposes and audiences in mind and to date have included:

- short stories
- fantasy
- podcasts
- poetry
- memoirs
- home project
- pantomime
- inventions
- mini-magazines and newspapers
- radio with pictures.

While anyone is welcome to attend the free after school workshops, the SSF is located in inner city Sydney to attract young people who are vulnerable or feel alienated from schooling. In particular, SSF welcomes Indigenous children and those from non-English speaking backgrounds. The *Martian Embassy* and gift shop front acts as a portal, transporting the children to a place of new possibilities and signaling that SSF is not a replication of what is expected at school. At SSF writing really matters. Each workshop in effect sees the creation of a community of writers, a subset of the larger SSF writing community. The SSF website states clearly that:

The most significant benefit of Sydney Story Factory programs lies in developing students' self-confidence and self-efficacy. Students build confidence in their writing ability, their ability to communicate and, through working with the volunteers, their capacity to interact with the adult world. All these things expand the students' sense of who they are, and what they are capable of. Programs also develop enthusiasm for the written word, by showing that writing is fun, valued and purposeful.
(Retrieved from: www.sydneystoryfactory.org.au)

There are a number of dimensions of the ongoing SSF evaluation that is being undertaken by Jackie Manuel and David Smith, University of Sydney. Over time they are investigating the impact of the creative writing workshops on student confidence, engagement in learning,

creative writing, and writing skills. Based on their review of research they identified five relevant dimensions or indicators of creativity for use in their evaluation. These are: inquisitiveness, persistence, imagination, collaboration and discipline.

Importantly there is no assessment of student writing but each student achieves a publication at the conclusion of every workshop program and there is often a related performance or sharing of writing for parents and community. Seven case studies are underway for a number of students who have returned for several workshops over the past two years. Smith and Manuel (2013) have developed and piloted a number of data-gathering tools that seek to capture development in creative writing and creative thinking through a longitudinal analysis of data sets for individual students. These tools include: pre- and post-workshop surveys (students); reflective questionnaires for students, parents and teachers; an observation schedule for volunteer observers and a guide for focus group interviews for students, parents and volunteer mentors. Manuel (2014) has developed a writing analysis framework that is used for gathering data from student writing drafts (pre-writing, drafts, final product) drawing on four models of writing (linguistic, socio-functional, multi-strand process oriented and cognitive) but with an emphasis on the process-oriented model. Different data-gathering methods have been essential because the students' self reports differ from those of their parents or the observers and the writing analysis provides another dimension.

To date more than 50+ sets of pre-post workshop student self-report questionnaires, 18 student interviews, 92 observation schedules and 186 student writing samples have been analysed. The data analysis provides evidence of the impact of SSF programs through students':

- consistent and almost unanimous reporting of 'enjoyment' and 'fun'
- increased capacity to generate and express ideas (*imagination, inquisitiveness*)
- increased confidence to share ideas using collaborative and art-based techniques (*collaboration*)
- expanded repertoire of skills in planning, organising and elaborating ideas (*discipline, imagination*)

- increased capacity to acquire and then develop strategies for problem-solving, editing, persevering with a task, and concentrating on the quality of their work (*discipline, persistence*)
- increased ability and proclivity to work with others (*collaboration*)
- increased capacity to engage with writing over a sustained period of time (*discipline, persistence*)
- the development of 'transferable' skills (including metacognitive) and strategies for generating ideas, writing and sustaining engagement with the process of production (*imagination, discipline, persistence*)
- self-reported increase in confidence, motivation to write, pride in their writing and enthusiasm (*inquisitiveness*)
- increased capacity to take risks and experiment
- positive impact on school work (some students and parents).

Analysis of writing (over at least two workshops/terms) provides evidence of the case study children's:

- development in cognitive, affective, socio-linguistic, linguistic, moral and creative dimensions
- a heightened awareness that the 'process' of writing can lead to a greater sense of 'uncertainty' at key phases in the writing development framework
- increased capacity for reflection, metacognition and self-editing techniques
- increased confidence in a range of discourses
- increased emphasis on higher-order skills in working memory
- movement from descriptive, literal and concrete to speculative, abstract, metaphorical.

The following excerpt from Sam's case study report demonstrates many of the above:

In the 2014 'Fear City' workshop, Sam's distinctive voice is even more pronounced when compared with his 2013 writing, with a consistent and convincing narrative voice driving the story. Notable is the ability to apply a wide range of higher-order language skills, such as, for example,

nominalisation, appropriately varied sentence lengths, beginnings and endings, incorporation of metaphor and other figurative language in appropriate ways, and the peppering of the writing with witticisms and humour. The final product of the 'Fear City' workshop – Sam's story titled 'The Return' – shows a clear capacity to invest in and persist with his writing over a significant period of time such that the final piece of writing is well-edited and polished. This can only occur with careful attention to, and regard for, the writing process, conventions and audience – characteristics of the accomplished writer. When comparing the analysis of his writing from Term 3, 2013 with that of his writing from Term 2, 2014... we can report that Sam has moved from 'Expanding' / 'Bridging' / 'Fluent' on the writing continuum to 'Connecting', thus achieving a significant movement across 5 stages of the writing continuum. This growth represents a remarkable development in Sam's writing over the course of one year at the SSF.

Sam's acumen in developing his ideas on paper extends to his ability to represent his ideas in visual forms. Below, for example, is Sam's visual representation of his 'phobic' character – 'Steve Phonophobia' – that he began developing in Week 1 of the workshop and completed in Week 2.

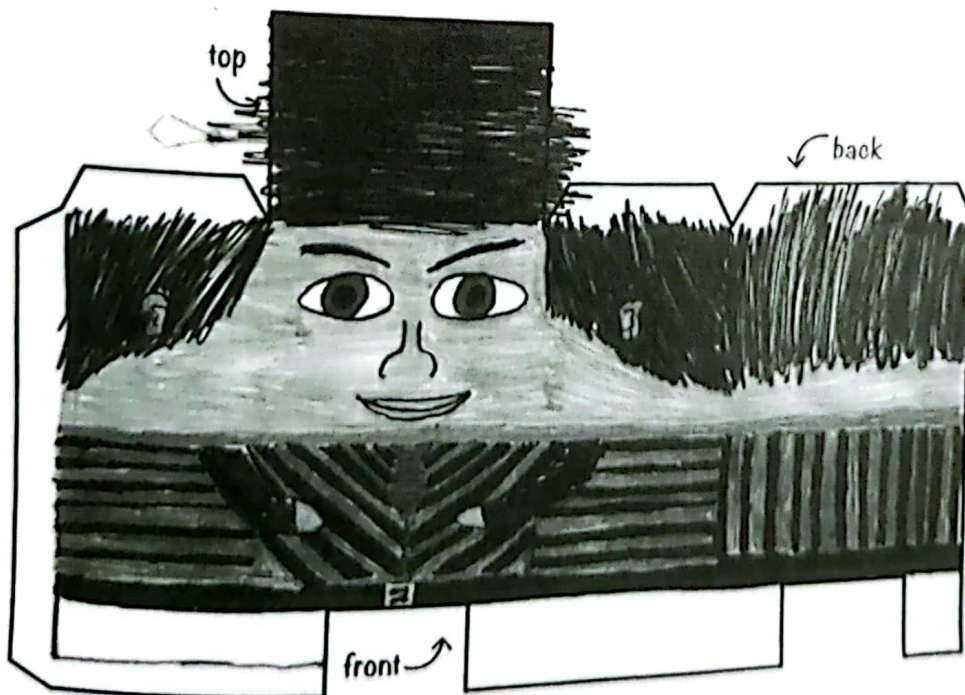


Figure 1. Sam's character – Steve Phonophobia

PhD researcher Amy Mortimer is investigating the impact of SSF workshops on student experience, writing outcomes and creativity to help re-establish creative writing as an acknowledged literary art form. Below is an excerpt of Amy Mortimer's exploratory case study after she had analysed phase one of her data:

Each student starts their (sic) workshop with a blank page and finishes with a published 'product' regardless of workshop. During the journey from workshop beginning to end they encounter aspects of the 'creative process'.

SSF has a creative 'magic' that operates under the storyteller's careful direction. Students move through their journey at SSF in a supportive, caring and nurturing environment both from the tutors and from each other. Yet they are also encouraged to move beyond their comfort zones, to explore different ways of knowing, to take risks and make deeper and richer connections with their own and other's thoughts. Social skills are developed as they are encouraged to be empathetic thinkers and to acknowledge and respect each other's ideas. Students learn to work interdependently and independently depending on the theme of the workshop. Academic learning is supported and enhanced at individual levels, with many students developing and improving oral and written communication skills. Perhaps more importantly, SSF is a place where students (and adults!) grow in confidence. This is harder to quantify, but my time as a volunteer working closely with students allowed me the privilege of seeing students grow in their confidence towards not only their oral and written task but towards themselves as learners. They began to see themselves as better learners and more creative thinkers, who are increasingly capable of having, owning and expressing individual ideas. This confidence has been reportedly transferred back to the school and home environment for some students.

In essence, SSF is a community: A place of belonging and of identity forming. A place to 'be'. A place for autonomy. It is a space of 'quietness' from the hustle and bustle of the everyday life – ironic given it's often such a noisy place! A place that loosens the chains of structure and routine often faced at school. It is an oasis of escapism (for the adults too!). A place that 'you get used to after a while' (student voice) and then 'can't wait to come back to and be free' (student voice). For some it's a place where they hope their children will 're-kindle their creative minds.' (Parent voice)

Without doubt SSF provides a much-needed respite to the institutionalised, over structured and often reductionist literacy school environments currently being mandated by both state and federal education government. SSF clearly demonstrates that creative writing isn't just about narratives and poetry. Important in and of itself, it can also be a tool to teach other subjects, just like any other creative art. Furthermore, not only is it a literary art form that can enhance literacy in primary aged children, it taps back into the much forgotten creative side of the human mind.

Concluding comments

Both brief examples shared in this chapter embody a creative approach to writing pedagogy and have clear implications for the classroom. It is clear that to encourage the continuing development of our innate creativity we need a process and process needs time. Teachers today often feel there is no time for this kind of activity because of the 'back to the basics' and 'teach to the test' mentality that threatens to overtake learning in school despite the policy rhetoric about creativity and problem solving. We must shift the emphasis from evaluating writing products to providing time for the creative writing process as well as the product and re-establish communities of writing practice.

Creative writing as both a process and a set of skills involves creative thinking (problem solving, constant generating of ideas, stretching students to develop in-depth/richer meanings, connecting ideas between new and old, including impact on 'flow' and the 'ah-ha' moments); perseverance and risk taking; encouraging students to 'have a go and encouraging them to think beyond the comfort zones of their own knowledge. The research around drama, literature and literacy together with the ongoing SSF evaluation provide rich research-based evidence for the imperative to transform writing classroom pedagogy.

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