Creative Writing: An Instructional Strategy to Improve Literacy. Attitudes of the Intermediate English Student

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Research Questions and Purpose

My interest as a secondary school English teacher is to promote literacy by engaging students in various forms of writing. I firmly believe that creative writing should be an integral part of novel studies in high school English classrooms in order to immerse students in the text. In order to test my belief, I analyzed my students’ reflective journals as they wrote about their creative writing activities in response to a novel. To my surprise, I discovered that writing in the reflective journals engaged students in the creative writing process as much as the creative writing in response to the novel. I analyzed the journals to gain an understanding of why my grade 10 students viewed creative writing as the most engaging activity in the novel unit, and how they felt about the creative writing tasks.

Theoretical Framework

My research is based on a view as a process that allows students to question and reflect on the content that they have learned. Writing allows students to become engaged in creative communication and critical thought, and to make sense of the world around them. This elicits an emotional connection between students and text, allowing the student-author to become reflective and critical and therefore, to engage in the act of writing (accessing, comprehending and retaining information). The act of writing helps make sense of thoughts running through students’ minds, which gives them shape and form. This, in turn, allows for new understandings to emerge through discovery and deep thinking. Wild sparks of creativity or deep pools of focused thought become a means for students to ‘act’ upon their abstract thoughts concretely by recording them on paper, creatively (Peterson, 2008).

Being engaged in the writing activities allows the students to arrive at a better understanding of different aspects of the literary work, “...the attempt to formulate and express one’s ideas through writing can be closely and complexly related to the process of learning” (Young & Fulwiler, 1986, Foreword). Moffatt (1986) speaks of writing as an act of making meaning like “hauling in a long line from the depths to find what things are strung on it” (In Young & Fulwiler, 1986, p. 22). The students continuously discover, create, and learn during the various stages of the writing process.

This study is also based on a process writing approach (Graves, 1994). Teachers should allow students some control on format, topic, purpose and audience in their writing. Allowing students to make responsible choices engages them to think about their reading and about the
information they encounter. Engagement in their work leads the students to a fuller understanding of information. Emig views the writing process as “an act of discovery, . . . no other thinking process helps us develop a given train of thought as thoroughly” (Young & Fulwiler, 1986, p. 22).

Research Methods

Participants

This study was conducted in a culturally diverse mid-sized urban secondary school in Ontario. The students are in two Grade 10 Academic English classes. There are a total of 59 students: 32 males and 27 females. The majority of students have parents who are university or college graduates; are active participants in the school community, and who share in the literacy development of their children both at school and at home.

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected a total of 59 meta-cognitive reflections from two Grade 10 Academic English classes working on the same novel study unit. I analyzed the meta-cognitive reflections, looking for patterns in their attitudes toward creative writing activities in response to a novel by identifying consistent key words and phrases about students’ attitudes. Two distinct categories emerged: (1) creative writing activities are enjoyable and (2) creative writing activities enhance reading comprehension.

Instructional Methodology

At the beginning of the novel study unit Catcher in the Rye (Salinger, 1991), I distributed an instructional package to the students and reviewed it with them, establishing expectations that the novel study was to be completed in a five-week block. Pre-reading tasks included a biography on J.D. Salinger, definitions of episode, first-person point of view, and symbol. Students were given group discussion topics. During-reading tasks included textual references for analysis and discussion, and content questions. Post-reading tasks included a chronological sequence of important events, a list of seminar topics, and a list of topics for small group discussions.

I also assigned topics for personal reflection: anxiety, depression, loneliness, friendship, conformity, and rebellion. The post-reading activity included a list of creative writing assignments (see Appendix A: Creative Writing Assignments). Students discussed expectations, tasks, assessments, and evaluations of the novel study. The unit consisted of a 5-week block of five 75-minute periods per week integrating various instructional strategies. The second half of each class in week 4 and the entire class in week 5 was devoted to the post-reading creative writing task.

The creative writing schedule followed a process approach to writing (Graves, 1994), including: independent time to review, reflect, and select creative writing tasks, independent time for brainstorming, sketching, listing ideas for students to engage in peer conferencing. During conferencing, students shared and created new ideas with their peers. Time was allocated for independent planning and drafting. Students shared drafts in pairs and small groups. The writing process continued with peer editing and additional revising sessions in small groups. Author groups allowed students to read drafts of their own writing and to receive constructive suggestions for their final drafts. Revising and editing for publication took place in the multimedia lab.
My role was to assist students in the various stages of the writing process, to facilitate small group sessions, to participate in author groups, and to conduct student-teacher conferencing. Student-teacher conferencing was kept to a 10-15 minute session for each student. The creative writing schedule allows for many different activities (individual planning, author groups, peer editing, teacher-student conferencing, publishing) to take place simultaneously because the process of writing never occurs in the same order for all the student-writers. At the end of the novel study unit, students reflected on each of the tasks, discussed and wrote about their learning process: a meta-cognitive written reflection. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, Section 4.1).

Findings: Students’ Attitudes towards Creative Writing Activities in Response to a Novel

Students Enjoyed Creative Writing Activities
The students wrote in their reflective journals that they felt creative writing was a more enjoyable learning experience than the other tasks that they had been assigned in the past. One student, Peter (all names are pseudonyms), stated, “We can think beyond the boundaries of the question-answer assignment …it’s like colour versus black and white … for sure it’s a change from regular seat work.” Peter recognized the flexibility of the task and preferred the uniqueness of creative writing. The students found the entire creative writing process to be a fun and engaging activity. They used their imaginations to incorporate their own interests and knowledge with the content they learned in the unit. Domenico, for example, said, “This way of learning makes a literary work more appealing. It was fun, non-restrictive and intriguing. There was always something new and interesting to think about and to discuss with my friends. It was definitely a change from what we would normally be given.” The non-restrictive and intriguing process appealed to his learning style and engaged him in deep thought that elicited conversations beyond the confines of the classroom.

Creative Writing Enhanced Comprehension
Mario felt that creative writing strengthened comprehension: “I guess this an informal way to learn, but I think that creative writing should be included more in the curriculum…I personally would choose the creative writing road to lead me to the understanding of the literary work.” Another student, Joseph wrote in his journal, “The writing part was a great experience because it was an easy, non-stressful way to indirectly learn more about the literary work…I had to re-read parts of the novel before I could create, so I could get a better understanding of the characters and on what we had just read. I had to visualize different aspects of the literature in my head.” Joseph actively read the novel to deepen his understanding of the content material. Through initial planning, brainstorming, drafting, sharing, and revising, the students creatively developed in written form thoughts and ideas they stored in their heads from the beginning of the novel unit.

Creative Writing Provides Opportunity for Self-Expression and Sense of Accomplishment
As one student, Vyenna, stated, “The creativity allowed me to express my opinion about different parts of the novel without having to find the correct answer; besides, a specific answer is usually straight forward if you have read and understood the work.” Vyenna used her understanding of the novel to express all those words that lingered in her mind and took shape in the written form through the writing process. In agreement, Raman wrote, “This is a true feeling
of self expression because our creativity can flourish with no interruptions. I love getting involved with the story and the character, and then being original and unique.” Raman became engaged in this unique experience of self-expression. He enjoyed the creative challenge.

The students engaged in authentic writing, creating final products based on material they learned in the novel unit. They used their own words, thus making the ideas their own. Most students felt a sense of pride and great accomplishment when the finished product was shared among their peers. Mario demonstrated pride and a sense of accomplishment when he wrote, “I am proud of my work and the final product. It allows me to feel a sense of accomplishment and to feel like an author.” The writing process was challenging yet, proved to be extremely rewarding for Ilona who wrote, “I was able to become the author…the way I wanted it to end and the way I wanted the setting to be …producing my own work from scratch was a great sense of accomplishment. It was challenging to get started, but very rewarding when finished.”

The students enjoyed the creative writing assignment because they saw it as having few constraints. The sense of freedom of expression begins with the selection process and continues with the students’ unlimited imagination and unique creativity. The assignment was not completely open-ended, as I established some parameters to focus the students’ writing and to provide a clear point of departure. Also, writing conventions (spelling, grammar, punctuation) were constantly emphasized during all stages of the writing process to reinforce the importance of effective communication. Ashton expressed his new-found sense of freedom in writing when he talked about finally being able to communicate his experiences:

Students feel at ease when they are permitted to create and share ideas…it’s a chance to think outside the box and communicate our experiences. Would you rather be with a creative group of people that does something different all the time? Or would you rather be with people that constantly do the same thing over and over again? The choice is obvious I think. Unless there’s an itching desire to be led on like a horse chasing a carrot tied to a stick for your entire life. It’s like asking if somebody wants to be free or not.

Conclusions & Implications

Written reflections and classroom discussions reveal the students’ excitement and enjoyment. Creative writing engages students in their learning. Words frequently used by the students in classroom discussion and in their reflective journals, such as “fun,” “creative,” “artistic expression,” and “free choice,” best describe their attitudes about the creative writing activity and the classroom atmosphere. They view writing as the most rewarding activity in the learning process; it allows the best understanding of the novel through personal artistic expression. I feel an urgency to capture the student voices, to record them, and to reflect on their attitudes. This one task, which becomes the focal point of their reflections, creates a new enthusiasm—a willingness to share their thoughts in classroom discussions. These feelings engage students, and allow them to flourish in future creative writing activities.

A question remains—is it only fun or is it also a time of active learning? They do learn; their written responses answer this question. I hear things I have not heard previously in their analysis of major themes, in their responses to content questions, and in their discussion of topics. I witness an eagerness and willingness to participate in something that is not only fun but also a definite learning experience. The students become an integral part of the novel by immersing themselves in the story to such an extent that in their discussions they become the
character. They speak not only as student but also as character. This activity allows the students to transform from reader to learner to author to character; they walk in the shoes of the literary character and show a greater understanding of the novel than in previous lessons. To continue engaging students and creating a dynamic classroom where they become competent independent communicators requires that we continue providing these opportunities to students; opportunities to learn and to share through creative writing.

The creative writing task serves as an enriching and reflective response activity that deepens the students’ learning. This task, which goes beyond the routine worksheets and activities, maximizes the worth of the text and the experience. The students immerse themselves into the text by becoming engaged in the act of writing. Throughout this process, the students continue to learn and make meaning by finding answers to particular questions, adding to their knowledge of the text, connecting the original text to their creative writing, questioning the author’s intent in the novel and their intent in their writing, questioning the choices made by the author, understanding the genre and form of the text, predicting, inferring and summarizing the text, and building on their understanding of the text. This is evident in their enthusiasm throughout the creative writing process, in the students’ creative writing, and specifically in the students’ written responses and oral contribution.

The students become quickly engaged with the creative task. They are enthusiastic and committed to publishing an original work. A sense of accomplishment and ownership permeates the classroom. They see themselves as authors while composing, and presenting the finished products to a real audience: peers and teacher.

Having students reflect and write about their learning reinforces my belief that all teachers should “infuse our teaching with smart, engaging writing activities that deepen kids’ thinking about the subject we teach” (Daniels, in Peterson, 2008, p. x). This encourages independent thought and enhances the ability to consider multiple perspectives critically. It improves literacy skills, writing/reading abilities, reinforces specific content material, and engages students. This study demonstrates the impact of creative writing in the English classroom and in literacy development, it presents the attitudes of the student-learner and the student-writer in the Intermediate classroom, and it emphasizes the importance of acknowledging student voices through meta-cognitive journals. Student voices inform teaching practice.

References


Appendix A: Creative Writing Assignments

*Catcher in the Rye*
Novel Study Unit
Grade 10 Academic English

Students will complete two of the following creative writing activities:

1. List questions a reporter might ask an ambulance driver, doctor or police investigator about John Castle’s suicide and Holden’s self-inflicted injuries. Write a news story for each of these events using the inverted pyramid style of writing.

2. Write an interior monologue in which Mr. Antolini explains the difficulties that privileged children face when they place no value on money.

3. Write a Medical Report. Your patient is Holden Caulfield. Explain in the report what survival techniques, hobbies, and interests might help Holden cope with grief for Allie’s death.

4. Compose a short segment of dialogue in which you become a peripheral character in the novel. Consider taking the role of a teacher, police officer, onlooker, carousel operator, zookeeper, subway conductor, store or restaurant owner, rest home attendant, skater, theatregoer, or fencing team member.

5. Compose two advertisement posters targeting a teen-age audience:
   i) that illustrates and communicates the dangers of dropping out of school
   ii) that illustrates and communicates the transition from being a teenager to becoming an adult

6. As Principal of Pency Prep School write a letter addressed to Mr./Mrs. Caulfield that informs and explains to them the reasons of Holden’s expulsion.

7. Create a short additional final chapter to the novel remaining faithful to Salinger’s style. The sky is the limit to your imagination and creativity.

8. Write three diary entries written by Phoebe:
   i) the night of Allie’s death
   ii) after the discovery of Holden’s expulsion
   iii) following her meeting with Holden in the park