The Importance of Reading in Creative Writing

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Abstract

It is of utmost importance to shed lights on the issues related to ‘writing’. There are in fact many reasons for such an interest on the part of both the teacher and the student. Writing represents, first, one of the major criteria of assessment of any student who is supposed to interact with subjects, topics, problems, theses, hypotheses, analyses and discussions while s/he ‘writes’. Writing for a student is, therefore, a necessary daily activity that reflects his/her ideas and understandings for the issues the curriculum proposes or for any other issue. Writing, secondly, is a hindrance for many students who find certain difficulties in conveying the appropriate meaning using the appropriate linguistic structures. This paper will present the effects of reading on writing and try to provide a clear and plain definition of creative writing in a way that will help students or writers in general to overcome the problems they may have in writing or to improve their linguistic production.

Keywords: reading, creative writing, problems, solutions.
In *Guide to Writing*, Harris & Cunningham said “Constructing a text, whether you are a reader or a writer, is an interactive, meaning-making process that involves both the written text and your mental image of that text. The interaction between your mind and the text creates meaning” (Harris. J & Cunningham.D, 1996:23). This assures, in fact, the existence of a tight relationship between reading and writing since they complement each other and embody a “process that involves movement back and forth between a written and a mental text” (Harris. J & Cunningham.D, 1996:23).

Through the analysis of the essay ‘Creativity in the classroom’ (cf appendix) for Earnest L. Boyer (Spack. R, 2007: 82-89), I will apply the idea that urges the need for time between drafts in order to allow what in a reader’s head shape his written text and allow his written text reshape what is in his mind. In other words, this paper explains how readers, like writers construct texts.

Regarding reading, there should be a structured plan, or as Lynn Quitman Troyka calls it ‘reading systematically’ (Troyka L. Q. & Hess. D, 2007). Students are used to use a structured plan for writing and not for reading. However, previewing in reading gets a student ready and keeps him away from reading inefficiently, which is the case for planning in writing. Similarly, to move through the material/the text and try to grasp its meaning in reading recalls drafting processes in writing. Reviewing in reading and which basically takes the student back over the set of information and ideas in the text to clarify a fine tune and to make it thoroughly his own is similar to the revision process in writing.

At a practical level, previewing is the step that precedes the text reading and in which the student discusses in class the overall theme in order to raise awareness of, and interest in the topic. This is mostly done orally as a major step towards framing the issue in the text. So, generating background knowledge of the text from the title, the headings and subheadings, the words in boldface, charts and illustrations etc help, in fact, to predict the context and lead to a deeper understanding of the text.

Understanding the text or, ‘core reading’ (Gardner. PS, 2005), comes after a reading, and most of the time a second reading of the text. Usually, students and teachers refer to the given questions for the text understanding which, in fact, help students tremendously disambiguating certain matters sometimes or highlighting the major ideas in the text. Another major strategy that “involves recording ‘of the student’s’ understanding of and reactions to what ‘he’ reads” is annotating” (Spack. R, 2007: 7). Annotating a text is held through the creation of headings and categories to identify sections, writing their summaries, stressing the significant sentences that bare clue ideas, expressing one’s own attitude towards a point in the text, asking questions about any topic that seems confusing for the student etc.

Annotating can be realized differently through some other more general techniques such as clustering, double-entry notes and taking notes. Clustering ideas consists of selecting a word that stands for the major idea in the reading and writing it at the center of a paper. To this word the student is to cluster all the related words and expressions from the reading and connect them with lines in the way that shows the “significant relationships among the ideas and details in a reading selection” (Spack. R, 2007: 8). A double-entry notes is a technique that helps the student/reader to consider the text from two perspectives. One entry, on the left-hand margin for example, serves the summary of the author’s ideas, and the other entry, on the right-hand margin serves to record the reader’s reactions to what he has just read.

The third major step in advanced reading and writing is the post-reading activity or specifically, ‘making connections’ which leads the student to the syntheses of the information.
that is presented in the reading. At this stage, he combines ideas, facts and beliefs to construct his own opinions and judgments about the issues. A student’s strategies might vary to include for example comparing and contrasting the author’s ideas – or parts of the ideas – and writing techniques, imagining how he, as a reader, might answer the writer in some of his queries, applying concepts discussed in the reading, arguing about an idea in terms of its definition, interpretation, application or use, criticizing the author’s interpretation at any measure etc.

In fact, we can consider a journal entry activity as the first practical type of exercise that helps the student to “capture his reactions to a reading” (Spack. R, 2007: 10) and move in a smooth way from an active reading to a reflective type of writing. A journal entry/writing is a free non-verbal communication activity that does not go beyond ten minutes writing nor necessitate a formal language. It is used to communicate and test out thoughts and ideas in a free way, in that there are no set of rules for how a journal entry should be written. “How you respond to what you read is shaped by the content and style of the reading selection and by your own experiences, beliefs, and values” (Spack. R, 2007: 10). A student might describe what went through his mind as he was reading, explore the issues he liked and interested him, and those he did not like about the reading and found confusing, expose what he agrees or disagrees with in the reading, link his own ideas and experiences to the text, raise questions in cases he does not understand all or a part of the text, choose a short passage that struck him etc.

The text ‘Creativity in the classroom’ for Ernest L. Boyer raises a list of challenging issues students can develop referring back to their own college or university experience. This text can be divided into two major sections. The first part deals with the problems and the causes of the absence of creativity in colleges and the second part represents the author’s alternatives and suggestions for such an obstruction. Among the major problems that have an effect on creativity in the classroom are the mismatch between the faculty and the students expectations, absenteeism, short attention span, high interest on grades and exams and not on the information, distance and lack of attention of teachers and irrelevance of their material, passivity and unwillingness of students to work, ‘beating the system’ through cheating or buying on assignments, and class size.

The solutions the author considers to improve the state of colleges and education in general and creativity in particular are the following: better class conditions (class size), omission of the recitation system, creating conferences and seminars, new conceptualization of lectures and discussions, equality between men and woman in class, creating competitive climate in the classroom, cooperation and collaborative projects, encouraging students, coaching them and as Boyer put it: “command of the material to be taught, a contagious enthusiasm for the play of ideas, optimism about human potential, the involvement with one’s students and –not least- sensitivity, integrity, and warmth as a human being”. The he adds “when this combination is present in the classroom, the impact of a teacher can be powerful and enduring” (Spack. R, 2007: 89).

As a matter of fact, the hitherto presented issues that the author raised in this essay stand for his own understanding and therefore interpretation of ‘absence of creativity in the classroom’. The student, whose stand point is normally different from that of the author, as the former lives within the system and might be the victim and the ‘unconscious eye-witness’, (he) might argue, criticize, agree with some issues, add some other points the writer cannot grasp from his standing point as a scholar and analyst.
Since “reading always involves an interaction between what is in the reader’s mind, what is in the writer’s mind, and what appears in the written text” (Harris. J & Cunningham. DH,1996: 19) and after summarizing the text and retaining the basic form and issues, the student might then represent the different roles and positions that are in some way affected by the issues. The student’s judgment and evaluation of the text comes after the analysis which includes drawing inferences or implied meanings, bias, recognizing its tone/s that can emerge basically from the word choice. The tone can be formal, informal, pompous, sarcastic, and so on…

A student’s interaction with Boyer’s essay might take the form of another essay that foreshadows/exposes his opinions towards the issues the writer raised. He might also add some other factors that he considers responsible for the absence of creativity in the classroom and that the writer did not care about or did not consider them. Among those issues one can mention the social and personal factors that were almost absent in this essay and that can be considered a logical hindrance for creativity. In this essay, a student might also agree with some ideas, identify with and prefer to explain them referring to his personal experience for example. He might disagree as well and follow the previously mentioned procedure. The issues, for instance, can be related to the overgeneralization strategy that Boyer uses in depicting a student as being passive, lazy, in grades pursuit, misbehaver etc. In brief, he draws a totally negative portrait for a college student.

As for the solutions that the writer suggests, the student can agree or disagree with them, explain his point of view, and add, maybe, some other solutions like to concentrate as teachers on ‘what should be taken out’ rather than ‘go into’ the student, or to help them to open and reveal the riches within them as they are according to Sydney J. Harris like ‘oysters’ (Spack. R, 2007: 5). The student might also talk about the structure of the essay and therefore, studies the linguistic texture, the figurative language, the tone and so on… in relation to the meaning and criticize their efficiency in this essay. The alternatives can be given aftermath in his own essay.

By the end, the student’s own essay will relate Boyer’s text and experience after testing them against his own experience. One of the challenges of composing such an essay is to determine the truth or validity of the author’s ideas. Regarding the essay structure, it should abide by the same writing requirements. It must first be build upon the same outline which forcedly contains an introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion. The writing process needs also to include an assessment for the writing situation, exploration and planning for the topic, drafting, revising, editing and proofreading.

The third requirement in writing is to use and refer to sources in that the student can refer to sources, locating, evaluating, documenting or taking notes from. His appropriate and effective use of multiple sources provides him with different viewpoints and more information that reinforce, develop and support his own viewpoint. A reader does, in general, comprehend and react to a text that contains other sources in a different ways than he does when he reads a text that does not include outside sources. The text ‘Creativity in the classroom’ includes six major references, with a varied rate of quoted sentences, and a list of reported ideas that exceeds twenty three. This elevated number of sources helped to build credibility and to support his ideas with more than two examples from students or from teachers and professors, who all of them present a complete image of the college life. In the same way, the student needs to refer to other sources to strongly sustain his ideas and create
persuasiveness and win credibility. He can at the same time evaluate the reading text sources, their accuracy, their relevance and their bias.
References


The Appendix is taken from:

Creativity in the Classroom

Ernest L. Boyer

Ernest L. Boyer (1928–1995) helped to shape education in the United States as Chancellor of the State University of New York, as U.S. Commissioner of Education, and as President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. His publications include School Reform: A National Strategy (1989) and The Basic School: A Community for Learning (1995). “Creativity in the Classroom” is the ninth chapter of Boyer’s book, College: The Undergraduate Experience in America, a report on research sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which included numerous team visits to public and private colleges and universities.

At a freshman psychology lecture we attended, 300 students were still finding seats when the professor started talking. “Today,” he said into the microphone, “we will continue our discussion of learning.” He might as well have been addressing a crowd in a Greyhound bus terminal. Like commuters marking time until their next departure, students in this class alternately read the newspaper, flipped through a paperback novel, or propped their feet on the chairs ahead of them, staring into space. Only when the professor defined a term which, he said, “might appear on an exam” did they look up and start taking notes.

What we found in many classrooms was a mismatch between faculty and student expectations, a gap that left both parties unfulfilled. Faculty, concerned with scholarship, wanted to share ideas with students, who were expected to appreciate what professors do. This appreciation might exist in graduate or upper-division courses, where teachers and students have overlapping interests, but we found that often this was not the case in lower-division courses.
On a nonacademic level, students at liberal arts colleges are more inclined to seek personal advice from professors than are students at all institutions. When asked whether professors encourage them to participate in classroom discussion, 91 percent of the students at liberal arts colleges said yes – 10 percent more than undergraduates at all colleges and universities.

Class size, like so many other aspects of teaching and learning, varies from one type of institution to another. Twenty-nine percent of the students at research universities report that “most” or “all” of their classes have more than one hundred students enrolled; at liberal arts colleges only 1 percent of the students report having most or all classes of this size. At the other end, only 5 percent of students at research universities said they had no classes larger than one hundred students. At liberal arts colleges, it was 80 percent.

We also discovered that, for most undergraduates, the freshman and sophomore classes (often the general education sections) are the ones most likely to be overloaded. Further, we found that at large institutions these classes are often taught by graduate assistants or junior professors. Forty-one percent of the students we surveyed report that “general education courses are rarely taught by the best faculty members in the departments in which they are given.” And 37 percent said, “General education courses reflect the interests of the faculty” rather than of the students.

We concluded that one important way to measure a college’s commitment to undergraduate education is to look at class size in general education. Do these courses enroll hundreds of students? Are they taught by senior professors? Do students have an opportunity to meet with their teachers? A college or university that does not give top priority to the basic undergraduate courses is not fully committed to excellence in education.

A significant number of students we interviewed said they had no objection to being in a large lecture course; others, however, strongly favored small classes that allow discussion. A math professor in a small university went so far as to say that if he had been introduced to mathematics in the kind of large, distracting lecture hall he himself was teaching in, he would never have continued to study the subject. We strongly urge, therefore, that the finest teachers should teach freshmen, and that undergraduate classes should be small enough for students to have lively intellectual interaction with teachers and fellow students.

In the early American college the primary method of instruction was recitation, a process in which students repeated from memory, often verbatim, textbook assignments. For disputation, students defended or attacked a proposition in Latin, the required language both in and out of class (Levine 171). By the mid-eighteenth century, the lecture by teachers occasionally supplemented student recitations. Lectures were, however, a talking textbook as instructors read slowly and students copied down what was said, word for word.

The lecture slowly replaced recitation and disputations. There was new knowledge to be conveyed, and it became more difficult to call on all students in the enlarged classes. Another sign of the times: The blackboard was first used by a teacher at Bowdoin College in about 1823 (Levine 173). And experiments with the seminar,
a German import, were introduced in the mid-nineteenth century. According to Arthur Levine, in his significant *Handbook on Undergraduate Curriculum*, it was in 1869 that Charles Kendall Adams tried the seminar at The University of Michigan. “Seven years later it became a staple in the curriculum at Johns Hopkins. . . . A discussion class, designed to supplement lecture instruction originally called the ‘conference quiz section,’ was created at Harvard in 1904” (173).

Today, the lecture method is preferred by most professors. With few exceptions, when we visited classes, the teacher stood in front of rows of chairs and talked most of the forty-five or fifty minutes. Information was presented that often students passively received. There was little opportunity for positions to be clarified or ideas challenged.

There are times, of course, when lecturing is necessary to convey essential issues and ideas and also to handle large numbers of students. At other times, such a procedure seems inappropriate, especially when the class is small and much of the material being presented is available in the text.

When discussion did occur in classes we visited, a handful of students, usually men, dominated the exchange. We were especially struck by the subtle yet significant differences in the way men and women participated in class. This situation persists despite the ascendency of female enrollments on most campuses.

Women now make up over half of all undergraduate enrollments and they get the majority of bachelor’s and master’s degrees. In 1963 about half of all women undergraduates majored in education. In 1983 only 15 percent were doing so. They receive 32 percent of the academic doctorates awarded, 25 percent of those in medicine, and 33 percent in law (Hacker 7).

Still, in many classrooms women are overshadowed. Even the brightest women students often remain silent. They may submit excellent written work, and will frequently wait until after class to approach a teacher privately about issues raised in the discussion. But it is the men who seem most often to be recognized and talk most in class. Not only do men talk more, but what they say often carries more weight. This pattern of classroom leaders and followers is set very early in the term (see Hall and Sandler 7–8).

We agree with Mortimer Adler’s conclusion that “all genuine learning is active, not passive. It involves the use of the mind, not just the memory. It is a process of discovery in which the student is the main agent, not the teacher” (23). And all students, not just the most aggressive or most verbal, should be actively engaged. It is unacceptable for a few students to participate in the give and take with teachers while others are allowed to be mere spectators.

On a related matter, we frequently were struck by the competitive climate in the classroom. Since as a democracy we are committed to equality of opportunity, and since in a vital society we need some way of bringing talent forward, we use, both on and off the campus, the calculus of competition to stimulate ambition and achievement. We must do this, or else we lack essential leadership in all areas of life.

However, if democracy is to be well served, cooperation is essential too. And the goal of community, which is threaded throughout this report, is essentially related
to the academic program, and, most especially, to procedures in the classroom. We urge, therefore, that students be asked to participate in collaborative projects, that they work together occasionally on group assignments, that special effort be made, through small seminar units within large lecture sections, to create conditions that underscore the point that cooperation is as essential as competition in the classroom.

The undergraduate experience, at its best, means active learning and disciplined inquiry that leads to the intellectual empowerment of students. Professor Carl Schorake, at Princeton University, says that the test of a good teacher is “Do you regard ‘learning’ as a noun or a verb? If as a noun, as a thing to be possessed and passed along, then you present your truths, neatly packaged, to your students. But if you see ‘learning’ as a verb! – the process is different” (McCleery 106).

While the college teaching we observed was often uninspired, we still found exciting examples of outstanding teaching at many institutions. One professor of English spoke to our site visitor as follows: “At this college there’s a lot of emphasis on teaching and there’s a lot of good teaching. I like that because teaching is my real vocation. I feel most strongly about that.” Another professor also enthusiastically endorsed his role as teacher: “This college is not filled with many academic bright lights. Students work hard and they really care about their studies. The fact that many are ‘average’ doesn’t bother me. My favorite image of a teacher is that of the midwife encouraging students, coaching them. What you really do in the classroom is help students come to know their own mind – become independent thinkers. These students have potential, but they have to have more confidence academically. It’s our job to bring it out of them.”

One Monday morning, at a New England college, we visited an “Introduction to Philosophy” course. The subject for the day was a problem from Thomas Aquinas: If God is all-powerful and all-good, how can there be evil in the world? The students offered answers: because salvation must be achieved through suffering, because Adam’s sin produced suffering, because God just set the world in motion and didn’t know how everything would turn out. “You’re revising the premise,” the professor responded to the last answer. “Your God is not all-powerful, he’s only good-intentioned.”

A student asked: “Why would you worship a God who is not all-powerful?” “Why not?” asked another. And so it went, with many hands raised and ideas flowing so fast that the professor had to intervene often to sort out key points and keep the discussion on course. “Today’s students are poorly equipped to deal with questions about ethics,” he told us later. “I think they’re unaccustomed to reasoning.” Yet, he persisted in engaging students in active forms of inquiry, providing them experience in addressing questions of ethics and challenging them to learn.

At a public institution in the West, we visited a mid-afternoon class in European history, with about one hundred students. The day’s lecture was on the influence of the writings of the French philosophers on the enlightened despots of the eighteenth century. “Did Voltaire and Diderot favor a radical reconstruction of society?” the professor asked.
“No, they just wanted to reform society in some ways,” a student answered.
“What ways?” the professor probed.
“To make it more rational.”
“How can people be made more rational?”
“Through education.”
“Did the Enlightenment writers want to introduce mass public education?”
“No, they still favored the aristocracy.”
“Why was that?”

This exchange continued through a discussion of how uniform legal codes developed. The professor lectured briefly, highlighting key themes, but he never stopped asking penetrating questions – and expecting thoughtful answers.

In an upper-division constitutional law class the professor used the “case method.” Each student had been assigned to read summaries of a series of cases dealing with the president, Congress, and the courts. Guiding the discussion, the teacher would name a case and tell a student to give him “the principles we can take from this example.” The classroom discussion was lively, with the instructor making it a point to call on different students instead of waiting for them to respond. He occasionally digressed from the set format with interesting historical asides, discussing, for example, Earl Warren’s role in the internment of Japanese citizens during World War II. He also tried, when possible, to tell students what was going on in the Supreme Court right now that related to the issues and cases they discussed.

In a class in the history of modern music, we watched the instructor, through a combination of knowledge, enthusiasm, humor, recordings, and exercises, keep the class engaged – even excited – through a ninety-minute session on the early technique in the music of Arnold Schönberg. In a freshman chemistry class, the professor spent the entire period on problem-solving techniques, hoping to break students of the habit of “looking for plug-in formulas” to solve problems.

In a seminar called “Women in Literature,” some students who were obviously not impressed with Jane Eyre were kept intellectually engaged through a compelling and at times humorous lecture style. “So she faints. Why? Look, you can’t have a nineteenth-century novel without somebody fainting. All right? All right.” Then: “Okay, let’s go through some of your objections to the novel. The diction is first on the list, right?”

At a New England college, we visited a course in French literature conducted entirely in French. The seventeen students enrolled had read Rousseau’s Discourse on the Origin of Inequality for homework. In class, the professor asked questions about the style and substance of the work: What does Rousseau say is the basis of human inequality? How would people label Rousseau were he to present his ideas today? What was the source of evil for Rousseau? For whom was he writing? What was his tone? Students seemed generally comfortable discussing the work in French and were able to pinpoint passages from the text to illustrate their answers.

The professor corrected their grammar and pronunciation from time to time. One student, for example, spoke as if l’amour du bien-être – love of comfort – were the same as l’amour – love. The professor asked her to translate the words literally