IS CREATIVITY PRACTICAL IN ELEMENTARY PROGRAMS?

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(Self-discovery and self-expression, the author of this article maintains, are subject to description and development. What, why, and how are the subjects of her consideration. Sister Bernetta teaches freshman English and advanced literature courses at the College of St. Teresa, Winona.)

Pragmatic America, from Ben Franklin on, has tended to ask "What use is it?" about any phase of education. The word practical in the title here concerns itself more with how to write creatively than why, assuming the usefulness of expanding during elementary school this side of human resources. Man is a symbol-making animal from the questions of childhood to his highest achievements. Indeed, if the second term in "language arts" is taken precisely, creative as a modifier of writing is unnecessary. In a Harvard lecture the American painter Ben Shahn spoke of the function of art as "to express man in his individualness and his variety." (The Shape of Content, p. 122). The child who reads or listens encounters persons who have so expressed themselves. In speaking and writing, pupils choose and arrange their own words so as to discover and then let others discover the special self that each one is, the unique (to a great extent) world that each one lives in.

Creative writing clearly has many uses, not only for the pupil but for the teacher. Recognizing genius is not one of these uses: for one writer like Thomas Wolfe, whose fame was spurred on by an intelligent English teacher, there are countless others like poet Hart Crane and playwright Arthur Miller, both high school dropouts, or William Faulkner, who failed to get through the freshman composition course at the University of Mississippi. What benefits, then, do result from creative writing imaginatively taught? For the pupil, these can embrace a keener response to life, self-discovery, growth in self-confidence, and introduction to cultural interests, all that is involved in what we mean when we talk

about the formation of the whole person. For the teacher, creative writing offers an excellent way to come to know intimately those whom he teaches while at the same time his preparation and techniques can help his own advance toward becoming what Henry James called a person "upon whom nothing is lost."

Intermediate and upper grades inherit their pupils directly from the first four grades and perhaps kindergarten, but all formal education has its prelude. Children don't come to school from vacuums. They have been the centers of their homes from their arrival on this planet. Parents have been opening children's eyes to things around them from the earliest years, some mothers and fathers, of course, more effectively than others. A series of advertisements by the Shell Oil Company featured this quality of pre-school wonder and included a colored photograph of a child gazing into a candle flame. Glowing within him are a thousand whys that grownups have left far behind: "Why does the wind blow?" "Why does it rain?" "Why does a guitar make music?" "Why does a crab have so many legs?" A guitar for him is a concert of whys. When he asks himself why a crab has six legs, why it moves sideways, whether or not it can go faster under water, he is beginning to travel the path that will bring him to the problem-solving required of a mature person. One of the teacher's most important responsibilities is to keep this curiosity alive, to intensify the process already begun at home.

Helping someone to become a more sensitive human being, enkindling his imagination, is an exciting daily challenge. It is alarming to read the lament of college teacher Richard Sewall: "Quite frankly, the student writing that I see, except for the products of a few noble but isolated experimental programs, strikes me as little short of appalling. It is dull and lifeless, stultifying to the imagination, and blighting to the spirit" (in Gordon and Noyes, The Teaching of English, p. 62). This desert Mr. Sewall finds hard to explain, in view of the hour-long monologues, imaginary playmates, quick interest in everything new evidenced by children under ten. Do incurious adults kill curiosity in their students? Was Wordsworth right about the child's exchanging clouds

of glory for "the prisonhouse" of this world?

As the child learns, in or out of school, his writing will improve in the measure that his teacher is alert to what is important in his world. That world, "so full of a number of things," offers subjects enough to eliminate blank tablet-pages, chewed pencil-stubs, and worried frowns. The bit of advice "If you want to make a rabbit stew, get a rabbit" will work more magic than how-to-do-it rules, or assigned topics in some strange world outside experience. The capital upon which to draw for writing is already present in the student; for several years he has been accumulating thousands of impressions and using thousands of words each day to ask or tell about them. In Language Arts in Elementary Schools, Wilmer Trauger emphasizes this capital:

> Imaginative expression is not, as is often supposed, a process of making something out of nothing. At its best it produces something relatively new, and it may point out relationships and significances previously unrecognized. But always it is woven from information and experiences already present in the pupil's mind. This fact is an important one to remember in teaching because it helps everyone keep a clear view of creativity (p. 254).

Art teachers frequently experience the reward of having a child say "I never before knew I could create anything!" Language arts teachers, too, can develop in their students the self-confidence that is needed. Maurree Applegate, in Helping Children Write, says, "I have seen apparently colorless personalities blossom under the warm sun of approval when their poems or stories were read to the class or were published in the class story book" (p. 3).

The young writer, then, should use as subject his world, but no one's world is ever large enough as it exists at any given minute. Opening avenues of interest in and outside the classroom is one of the most important things a teacher can do. Dedicated parents, if they are patient, carry on this sort of activity all the time. Recently I traveled on a train from Albany to Syracuse in front of a father who conversed all that way with his five-year-old son in as lively a manner as if

he were talking with a contemporary. They discussed the Revolutionary War battles fought in the region, the factories we passed, danger of live wires, details of the scenery, without any patronizing, or boredom on either side. Every comment of the teacher, like every word of that father, is a seed.

Besides encouraging whys, creative writing aids pupils in answering who and what. All of us must face the questions: "Who am I?" "What kind of world do I live in?" Whenever creative writing runs the risk of being shoved aside as a luxury item, it is probable that this correspondence of language to life is being ignored. Prose style moves along with personal growth, from the grades throughout one's whole life. Failure to take seriously the art of writing may be remedied by a well-illustrated, varied unit on the long struggle man has gone through, from the earliest ages on, to put into thought-symbols, or words, that most valuable part of him, his interior world.

Moreover, the language teacher who turns to other arts in the curriculum can open window-shutters on life. Even if pre-planning with colleagues is impractical, the individual teacher can do much by bringing aids into the classroom: pictures ranging from twentieth-century Paul Klee to early cave drawings; phonograph records of the exquisite melodies Mozart composed from kindergarten age on, or of poems read in the literature class as these have been set to music; sculpture, which uses the sense of touch as well as that of sight. Tapping these sources of pleasure can bring about permanent avocations. Besides, there are the humbler crafts, such as homemaking, in connection with which displays of art-objects brought by pupil or teacher can serve as inspiration for writing (see Sister Thomasita's illustrated essay on homemaking in the April-May, 1964 Country Beautiful).

In truth, the language arts teacher has more in common with music and art teachers than with any other members of the staff, since all employ a common vocabulary: rhythm, design, contrast, emphasis, variety, mood. The motivation of the three is similar: instruction through delight. And finally, assessment of value in these

areas must be relative--not, as in mathematics, absolute. Wilmer Trauger in Language Arts in Elementary Schools believes that the creative writing teacher should capitalize on this affinity by helping children apply to three or four media the key-concepts on which all arts are built. Among these he names concreteness, selectivity, the figurative as opposed to the literal (p. 354).

Just as the art teacher can dramatize for a pupil the importance of margins and spacing in manuscripts, so can the writing teacher let children come closer to understanding canvases by showing how authors often say things not be to interpreted literally: artists, too, can mean something different from what a quick glance reveals. Integration will mean taking the trouble to introduce God's or man's art into the classroom, like the seashell Nina Walter used to motivate a poetry-writing lesson (Let Them Write Poetry). It will mean cutting across subjects rather than compartmentalizing them. But the insight one art gives into others will compensate. History, biology, any subject, can demonstrate what Louis Agassiz called the basic tools of learning: observation and comparison.

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