

Reclaiming the “creative” in the English/literacy classroom

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The publication in 2002 of Richard Florida’s best-selling book, *The rise of the creative class* (Florida, 2002) could well be seen to mark the full-blown arrival in the public consciousness of a redefinition of the term “creative”, that had been going on for well over a decade previously. Creativity, for most people, had previously been largely something to do with the arts. Painters and musicians were creative; when one did creative writing in English classes in schools, it was a matter of “artistic” writing, imaginative fiction or poetry. One might find a “creative solution” to a problem, or think about how some “creative accounting” could be done when the bank manager called one in, but these were largely secondary meanings to the artistic ones.

Now Florida was telling us that creativity was fundamental to the economy. Rather than being something people enjoyed the products of in their leisure time, it was the thing that made businesses and cities prosper. It was not a matter of having an artistic bent: it was all about a particular mindset and a particular lifestyle. Creativity was the basis of the knowledge economy; creativity made money; creativity had arrived.

This might have been good for English/literacy teachers in that developing creative capacities has always been a fundamental element in their practice. One of the aims of the subjects is to foster imaginative uses of language, and there was an obvious and ready argument to be made that, given the centrality of language to human interaction and human thinking, developing creative capacities with language should be a fundamental underpinning of the creative economy.

As it happened, English was at a point where it was less concerned with those creative uses of language than it had probably been at any point in its history. The public rhetoric was largely about developing basic functional literacy skills in clearly measurable ways. Ironically, given that many business people were busily reading Richard Florida’s book, this was often demanded and promoted in terms of giving students what employers wanted and what the economy needed to thrive. The academic debates in the subject were largely around socio-critical versions of literacy, with an emphasis on deconstructive reading of a wide range of everyday texts, and so the capacity to critique was often being developed far more strongly than the capacity to exercise creativity with language.

Thus there has arisen the need to reclaim the “creative” for English/literacy classrooms. Not that it has disappeared, but over the last decade or so it has become submerged. Perhaps it is not so much a matter of reclaiming as of reaffirming the significance of the creative, and seeing it as central to the main game, not just a slightly embarrassing, marginal pleasure.

Like any much-used term, there are many versions of “the creative” and creativity has been seen in many ways. It will be useful to spend a little time outlining some of

these, not with any intention of narrowing down the definition, but because it gives the opportunity to examine something of its scope.

Much of the seminal work on creativity in the last quarter of the Twentieth Century focused on what we might call “big-ticket” creativity, that is, the creativity that makes for major innovations in particular domains, and makes the creative person (usually rich and) famous. This is the creativity of successful published authors, of Nobel-winning scientists, of policy-governing economists, and such people. The most influential work of this kind is associated with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who undertook a major study of almost a hundred eminent creative people and examined “creativity as a process that unfolds over a lifetime” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.vii). His book gives a fascinating picture of both the consistency of experience of creative people across various domains, as well as its diversity. Other studies were being done by Howard Gardner and his colleagues in Project Zero at Harvard (see <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/>). Gardner and Csikszentmihalyi collaborated with David Feldman in producing an influential theorization of creativity, the Domain Individual Field Interaction (DIFI) Model (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi & Gardner, 1994). Wendy Morgan makes productive use of their work in this volume.

As interesting and useful as all this was, it did tend to leave those who didn’t become famous unaccounted for, and, in particular, seemed rather remote from a Year 10 English class doing creative writing on a Friday afternoon. Educators, while sometimes drawing on this work, were naturally concerned to see creativity as a much more ordinary, and indeed universal phenomenon – a capacity that every child has to some degree, and one that can be developed in educational settings (see, for example, Cropley 2001). Anna Craft, most notably, coined the term “little-c creativity” (Craft, Jeffrey & Leibling, 2001), the kind that we can all show in everyday life, and has gone on to write about the central importance of creativity of this kind in Education (Craft, 2005). She is concerned not only with teaching for creativity, but with teaching and learning themselves as creative practices.

It will be noted that nothing of this work is subscribing to the notion of creativity as limited to the artistic; it sees creativity as being able to manifest itself in all spheres of human endeavour, although the Arts may be seen sometimes to have a privileged place in the spectrum. English/literacy is interesting in this, since it in itself covers a great deal of the spectrum. It encompasses the artistic and imaginative texts we know as literature, but moves through to teaching about the practical everyday texts that we also need to read and produce as we live in the world. If we are looking at the creative in English/literacy, do we find it, at least potentially, all along the spectrum, or is it limited to the artistic end of literature and creative writing? There is an argument that imagination and creativity have a part to play in the production of all texts (see Misson, 2004), not least because the aesthetic is potentially an element of all texts (see Misson and Morgan, 2006).

Jan Blommaert has a fascinating discussion about the different kinds of creativity inherent in all discourse events, since such events are almost inevitably producing something new (Blommaert, 2005, pp. 104-107). However, there is a looming problem if one extends the definition of creativity too wide: Where does one draw the line? Virtually everything a human being does could be seen as creative. In the end,

if one goes down this track, creativity becomes synonymous with productivity, and loses all precise meaning.

While one would not want to give up the notion that creativity may be being exercised in producing all kinds of texts, it is more natural (or naturalised) to think of creativity in terms of fiction and poetry, and that is what most of the writers in this volume have done (although that doesn't mean that what they say might not have implications for a greater range of texts). There is no doubt that the nature of creativity is more readily discerned in imaginative literary texts.

It is worth asserting that English/literacy does develop creativity in artistic terms since there is a strong body of work that shows the importance of education in the arts. Working in the arts develops students cognitively in profoundly significant ways, as shown in such things as the *Champions of change* study (Fiske, ND) and the work of Ken Robinson (Robinson, 2001). It is a pity that English has in many ways been divorced from the Arts in school curricula, because it has meant that the natural alliance with drama, music and visual arts teachers in promoting creativity and aesthetic ways of knowing the world has not developed.

What are the fundamental features of creativity that are most relevant for the English/literacy classroom, and can most readily be developed there? There are three major themes running through this collection of articles: the first is about creativity as problem-solving, the second is about creativity as making connections, the third is about creativity as intuitive and non-rational. The three things shade into each other – the problems are solved by making connections that are frequently intuitive – and most of the articles at some point touch on all three elements, although they may be concentrating on one or the other.

Two of the articles centre on unconventional narratives and writing in a hypertext environment. Rebecca Luce-Kapler tells of how uncomfortable a group of Year 11 students she was working with were when confronted with a literary hypertext. Teresa Dobson talks about the disruptions in an Alice Munro short story. In both cases, the text presents a fundamental problem of how to read it and how to make connections between the fragments or sections. Both see the struggle to do this as essentially creative, and so reading such “writerly” texts, to use Barthes' term, draws on our creative abilities in ways other than those called on by more conventional narratives. In both cases, they work with students on writing hypertexts. Dobson encourages students to make connections out from the opening of the Munro story (which the students hadn't read), and we see a sample of the range of potential in those paragraphs, as well as the creativity of the students. Luce-Kapler asks the students to create a hypertext narrative themselves. The experience makes many of them much more receptive to the form – such texts may well be more “writerly” than “readerly” in the very simple sense of being more fun to write than read – whereas some remain resistantly faithful to linear narrative.

Narratives such as those Luce-Kapler and Dobson work with are very much postmodern phenomena. Carl Leggo in his article investigates some of the major features of postmodernism, and relates it to his writing as a poet. Indeed, he gives us a quintessentially postmodern text, with his discussion of each of the tenets of postmodernism he is looking at accompanied by a poem. The poem does not simply

exemplify the tenet, but the reader is invited to intuit the connection. As he says, his text “is more about resonance than reason, more about evocation than exposition, more about performance than proof”.

Two of the other writers talk about their own creative practice in similar terms. Luce-Kapler talks about her experience in writing a novel, which she felt dissatisfied with because “it was not very evocative”. She put it aside, but has come back to it since and recreated it as a series of fragments that much better captures the complexity of her main character’s life by producing multiple perspectives on her.

Wendy Morgan reflects on her own processes in writing a long poem. She sees as centrally important the notion of the “undermind”, which she takes over from the work of Guy Claxton (1997). Claxton defines this as the “intelligent unconscious”. Morgan gives many examples of the undermind at work as she writes her poem, and shows how much the process is about making connections, shaping the experiences through the words until they are intuitively right. The process is “more about resonance than reason”, as Leggo would say.

The same kind of “non-rational” intuitive judgment underpins the poetry writing that Dennis Sumara and Brent Davis take as the starting point for their discussion of three different theoretical conceptions of learning. The task set was one of making connections between seemingly random elements – again a kind of problem-solving – and producing a poem from it. Sumara and Davis draw on complexity science where intelligence is seen as “the ability to make innovative responses to emergent circumstances”. Their far-reaching discussion illuminates much in the other articles, perhaps not least the way people attempt to make sense of fragmentary texts through working with a coherence theory, whereas such texts are complex systems and so a different kind of understanding is necessary.

Morgan reflects on the significance of her own experience as a poet for what might be done in a classroom to support students in their writing. She considers the dilemma of writing being in many aspects a private matter, waiting for the undermind to do its work, whereas classrooms are much more rough-and-tumble public spaces, and she talks about some possible classroom strategies.

Deborah Fraser takes us into a classroom where students are being encouraged to write metaphorically. Metaphor is, of course, an obvious case of creative connection, and her young students demonstrate a quite wonderful creativity in their work. Fraser discusses the value that such work has for the students in developing their understanding of the world as well as their understanding of texts, and in giving them an enjoyable, productive experience.

Mary Aswell Doll also gives us the privilege of visiting her classroom where she teaches about myth. She shows us some of the wonderfully inventive ways in which her students produce their final assessment projects. She encourages them when developing these to think the way myth thinks: “metaphorically, non-sequentially, paradoxically, sometimes humorfully and playfully, but always conscious of a strange and fabulous otherness”. Interestingly, some of the connections she makes in her teaching are worrying to a few of the students, because they are subversive of their pre-existent beliefs. Creativity is not necessarily comfortable.

From all the articles one gets a sense that creativity is important because it both produces and thrives on a kind of liberation. It encourages different ways of thinking; it encourages students to see things from different and multiple perspectives. It is not afraid to cope with complexity, and it is not afraid to trust to the undermind. It’s for these reasons that it is necessary to reaffirm its place in the English/literacy classroom.

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POSTSCRIPT

On behalf of the editorial, I would like to acknowledge Fang Fang’s contribution to this issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*. Her narrative of her development as an English teacher in China takes up themes of previous issues. The journal welcomes contributions from practising teachers who are willing to write theorised narratives based on their practice.

Terry Locke (Coordinating editor)