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# THE DRAMA OF TEACHING READING THROUGH CREATIVE WRITING

*Eleanor Buelke*

Creative guidance and teaching in the classroom can lend a sense of drama to any part of the teaching-learning process. They can activate living relationships between teachers and pupils which vitalize both teaching and learning.

## **Creative Teaching: Real-life Drama**

Several definitions of drama may be equated with creative methods of teaching. Two of these are found in a recent book by Kenneth Thorpe Rowe. In one he says drama may represent "a way of looking at life for truth to be found there and revealed." (2:139) In a second he refers to it as "material of life experienced through the temperament and ordered by the mind." (2:232) The *Webster's New World Dictionary* gives this definition, among others, of drama: "a series of events so interesting and vivid as to resemble those of a play." Creative classroom procedures can dramatize the learning process and help children to establish consistent, persistent ways of organizing experiences so that they may find the truth they seek throughout life.

## **Learning Processes: Stage Settings**

Teachers who view learning to read as a functional process and the teaching of reading as one of many stage sets for creative guidance involve themselves and their pupils daily in the use of spontaneous, flexible, creative procedures and materials. Teachers who believe that learning is most effective when learners are aware of their roles in the learning processes and of the way they feel about these roles and processes, use intuitive methods for teaching. These become the general procedures for teaching and learning all the communications skills. Teachers who know that skills and knowledge in any area are perfected and extended as they are used and interrelated in other areas provide learners with many stage settings and numerous "communities of the mind" in which to enact varied roles. Teachers who live with awareness that life is active experience in which it is the receptive and appreciative players who receive the most satisfaction from their roles supply and intensify many experiences in which learner's perceptions are sharpened and deepened.

## **Creative Writing: Role Interpretations**

With a skillful, imaginative teacher as director, the presence and increase of these four conditions: involvement in activities, insight of self, interplay of ideas, and intensity of experiences, light the classroom

and prompt a good performance from each pupil. All of these four conditions can be promoted through a well-organized, dynamic, pertinacious creative writing program. Such a program is a propulsive factor toward voluminous, skillful, and pleasurable reading. It implements learning of reading skills in a number of specific ways.

The program helps teachers to understand pupils and their feelings by providing opportunities for them to articulate such feelings without fear or reprisal, criticism, or loss of self-respect. It helps children to understand themselves and to build an adequate and satisfying self-concept. Research concerning the ways in which children learn indicates that they learn best when they possess satisfactory images of themselves and when they feel comfortable and amiable in their relationships with others and their environments. One writer expresses it this way:

For a person to have the courage to do, what he is at the present moment must be respected. To insist that he be other than he can be at the moment may cheat him of his sense of trust of himself, his initiative, his independence, his self-control. (1:239)

Encouragement and frequent opportunities for expression support children in their desires to verbalize and share their feelings. A boy who has experienced reading and spelling failures in the early elementary grades writes this when asked to write about trees:

If I were a tree  
I would be a sequoia.  
Then I might be famous.  
I would be twice as high as other trees!  
I would be able to see around the United States.

Writing about the world of people whom they know best, and view much of the time with objective clarity, this is what two second graders say:

My dad's name is Mr. Sanders. He works for Continental Can. He is five-feet-nine. Sometimes he's mad! He takes us to movies. He hunts for deer. He's big! He's handsome and smart!

My mother's name is Mary Summer. She makes Tom's and Chip's bed. My mother makes cakes. She smokes cigarettes. She watches Dr. Kildare. I like my mother because she bakes cookies!

The morning after a severe storm of near-tornado strength second graders in one community arrive excited and bursting with these stories:

It was muggy and wet out. All the trees were down. I felt sorry for all those trees being knocked down. They were just beautiful!

We drove around the neighborhood. We wanted to see the damage the storm did. Some of the big, beautiful oaks were blown down by their roots. I felt terrible! All that money wasted!

I saw a big tree right on top of our car. I felt sick! I was sick!

Relating and reacting comfortably with each other and their teacher, in a non-threatening climate, children are becoming ready to assume a greater share of responsibility for academic learning.

The program involves children directly in the planning, structuring, and organizing of social studies and science units. Purposeful, wide-level, broad-interest, individualized reading is triggered from here. Reading related to himself is a stepping stone for the child in broadening and deepening the content of subject fields. Probing children's feelings and knowledge in an area of learning provides answers to:

- A. Where do pupil interests lie?
- B. What do they already know, or believe?
- C. In what areas is teacher guidance needed for reading and what materials are required to fill in gaps and broaden knowledge?
- D. What are some legitimate bases for grouping children for cooperative study, projects, and reporting, which in turn, involve more reading and writing?

Some examples of writing done by second grade pupils during the initial development of a unit of "workers of our world" center around pupils' wishes and thoughts about adults' workaday world:

Someday when I grow up I would like to be a teacher. A teacher teaches children. A teacher needs to know how to read. A teacher needs tools, like a pen and a pencil. A teacher works inside. She helps the children to learn. Being a teacher is nice work. To be a good teacher I would have to go to school five years. I would be paid well. I think I would be happy this way.

When I grow up I want to be called a prima ballerina. All ballerinas dance. A ballerina needs ballet slippers. A ballerina does her work on a stage. She has to do exercises. I love to dance!

I would like to be a policeman. A policeman protects people. He has to know how to use a gun. He has to be

a good fighter. He works outside. He helps others by protecting them. It is hard! He is paid well. I would like it!

This unit is then structured, justifiably and easily, around study by five groups of pupils, each of which gathers and reports information about one of five categories of world workers: professional, skilled and business, unskilled, government, and production workers. Near the conclusion of the unit pupils write their reactions to the question, "If you were going to be a pioneer in a new land and could choose five workers to go with you, what would your choices be?"

If I were going to be a pioneer in a new land, I would like to go to a land not too sandy, not too noisy,—and peaceful. I would like to take a teacher along, because if there were children there the teacher could make a class and teach. I would take a nurse because I might get injured. I would take a newspaper man because we might run into interesting things he could report, and I would take a writer to write. I would not like to go there, really, because it's lonesome.

If I were going to be a pioneer I would go to a land far, far away where no people live—a peaceful land. I would take a doctor, nurse, scientist, cook, and carpenter along. They could study things there, keep me well, build houses, and cook my food. Yes, I would like to be a pioneer in a new land. It would be different, and exciting!

Involving children's minds and hearts directly in study areas with which they have identified their personal interests diminishes problems of motivation, participation, and assimilation.

The program stimulates children's interests in and reactions to events of current interest in the world. Often the relationship between practices in the classroom and experiences outside the classroom are vague and obscure to children. This condition increases the likelihood that education, for many, may become static and terminal, rather than dynamic and perpetual. Events of national and international importance may affect even young children quite deeply. Seven-year-olds express their feelings about the tragic weekend of November, 1963, as follows:

I am sorry that the head of our state is dead. On T-V they said all flags were to be lowered. People from all over the world came to Washington. Most people are crying because of Oswald. People are very sorry that the president is dead. And we are going to help!

I was doing my Weekly Reader when I heard the sad

news. I listened to the sad music on T-V when I was home. We watched the funeral cortege in Washington, D.C. I cried all Friday, and Saturday, and Sunday, and Monday. My daddy and mommy cried, too.

Such articulated thoughts, ideas, and emotions aid children in critical evaluation of further reading about related happenings and circumstances.

The program allows for, and encourages, the use of an uncontrolled vocabulary which raises the ceiling for word recognition. Vital meaning of words in context aids such recognition and the retention of learning. Teachers can help children learn at “thirty” different levels within the time allotted to teach at only one level of instruction.

The program familiarizes children with varied literary styles and forms. In wide, critical reading of favorite kinds of literature second grade pupils uncover features of style and form common to these forms of writing. They incorporate these characteristics in their own writings as in this example of an original fairy tale:

Once upon a time there lived a king. The old king had three sons; their names were Paul, Jeff, and Tim.  
(Traditional beginning)

They had a magic horse named Prince. Prince could kiss the ladies and bow to the men. Prince could disappear and the king could not see him. (Characters with magical properties)

They told the people and the King that this was a magic horse that had saved them from the dark woods.

They all yelled and clapped, and loved the Magic Horse! (Traditional “happily ever-after” ending)

Frequently, children of this age find that the poetic form is convenient for expression of their delightful imagery:

I feel like a colored leaf  
Falling,  
Falling,  
Falling,  
Falling,  
Slow motion;  
Turning,  
Dropping,  
Twisting,  
Stopping,  
Sleepy, big leaf.  
The ground looks like whipped cream;  
The snowflakes are paper cut-outs;  
The ice

Is a mirror, where people are skating;  
 And the hills,  
 Where people are sliding,  
 Are dips of vanilla ice cream.

Some second graders have found that one of the best ways to communicate with their classmates about the information and concepts learned in a study unit is through drama and role playing. Writing, directing, staging, and producing their own plays and puppet shows are among the most popular and rewarding group presentations. If they are given adequate background experiences and information about the subject, plus knowledge of the form and format, children write plays almost as easily as stories. Reading of these plays calls for a high degree of concentration and interpretation by all children involved. Desire to participate in drama of this kind often sets higher goals of aspiration and determination for pupils with lower achievement levels.

Most children enjoy animal stories. Some young authors create fairly lengthy, fanciful sketches which can then be produced in illustrated, book form for pleasurable reading by others. "Mrs. Busy Beetle" is a representative example:

*Page 1:* Mrs. Busy Beetle is busy with her twenty children. She is busy feeding her children. (Illustration: Mrs. Beetle and a number of her children)

*Page 2:* She is busy going to the store and back. (Illustration: Mrs. Beetle, carrying packages; store in the background)

*Page 3:* Today Mrs. Busy Beetle is getting ready for a birthday party for one of her children. She is baking a cake. (Illustration: Mrs. Beetle with the cake)

*Page 4:* The twenty children are helping her. Now they are all busy. (Illustration: All twenty little Beetles)

*Page 5:* They are glad that Mrs. Beetle isn't too busy for a party. (Illustration: Five young Beetles with happy faces)

*Page 6:* It is Sally Beetle's birthday. She is five. (Illustration: Sally Beetle with her birthday cake; five candles are on it)

*Page 7:* After the party is over, Mrs. Beetle has to clean up, and her children help her. (Illustration: Mrs. Beetle, with two of her children helping her)

*Page 8:* She finds that with so much help she isn't so busy after all. (Illustration: Mrs. Beetle, seated in an easy chair, watching T-V)

Ability to understand sequential development of ideas and competency to report occurrence of incidents in some logical order are promoted through the reading and writing of mysteries, biographies, and autobiographies.

Reaction to recognition and reading of many kinds of good literature raises the curtain on an extension of enjoyment and appreciation in almost all areas of the arts. It develops an awareness of the events, discoveries, and trends which make the child's kaleidoscopic world of today ever-demanding in its need for new solutions to problems.

The program provides for applied, meaningful phonetics, improved oral reading, and more rapid, comprehensive silent reading. Youthful writers find a meaningful application of understandings and rules concerning such things as root words, prefixes, suffixes, and compound words. Both inductive and deductive reasoning become a matter of individual learning and a means to self-help as children work out the changes they wish in a root word to express their original ideas. In writing stories about a circus parade these words are used: laugh, laughing, laughed, and laughter. In the unit about world workers these words are needed: drug, drugstore, and druggist; teach, teacher, teaches, teaching, and schoolteacher. The stories about the big storm include: storm, storms, stormy, storming, and windstorm. In developing mysteries children make use of: mystery, mysterious, mystified, and mystifying.

Familiarity with the context of his own writing and his urgency to communicate his own ideas assist the learner in further establishment of habits of correct pronunciation and precise enunciation. In turn, correct pronunciation of words in a known context helps in development of word analysis skills. Further, precise enunciation calls for attention to sounds of letters and their placement in words. Writing and reading their own thoughts in natural speech patterns help children to read other materials in thought patterns and ideas, rather than in isolated, unrelated words.

The program develops skill in using varied kinds of sentence structure, correct punctuation, and good language usage. In order to express their concepts adequately children discover that certain kinds of sentences, punctuation, and word usage are more effective than others. As they reread and check to make sure that their writing tells precisely what they wish it to say, they engage in purposeful practice in editing skills.

This program deepens, widens, and intensifies meanings of words



and phrases. Effective reading involves infinitely more than physical responses to written symbols. In it children relate themselves to a world of ideas expressed by these written symbols. In true reading processes in the classroom, children and teacher explore ideas and emotions together. The written symbol, like the symbolic character in a drama, comes alive when pupils discover that their peers have similar feelings of sympathy, fear, hate, and love that they do.

Exploration of certain scientific, or sociological, concepts can stimulate a child's imaginative, creative thinking and help determine the intensity of his awareness, the depth of his perceptions. In response to the question about how they can be "good citizens" seven-year-olds write:

On the playground I don't pick the flowers. I don't knock people down. I don't push people in line. I obey the teacher. I listen when the teacher talks.

I try not to cheat in games I play in gym. I try to follow the rules. I try not to fight on the playground. I try to do my work independently and not to cheat. I try to obey the teachers.

I have not cheated in any games this year. I have worked independently in the work I have done. Robin and I have picked up junk from the playground. I have helped other people when they were hurt.

In regard to their concepts about time and space these children write the following definitions of something "too far away:"

When I was a baby, my grandmother said that Florida was too far away to go. But now I can go to Florida in a car if my mother or my father takes me.

This summer I will be going to Florida with my family.

Up north is too far away because I'm excited when we go. And I keep asking, "Are we almost there?" My mother will say, "No, we will not be there until twelve o'clock."

Humans are motivated by desires to explain questions dealing with their environments. If we repeatedly intimate and practice "omniscient instruction," providing all the answers, these desires may be satisfied just as well by inaccuracies as by accuracy of explanations. It is the willingness to deal with the unknown, the unpopular, the divergent, the novel, which leads to human progress. (3:439)

Learning enthusiasm diminishes, satisfaction decreases, and human progress declines, as more and more stereotyped answers and definitions are provided for pupils. Such provision closes the curtain and

writes finale on many ideas with great potentiality. In contrast, provision for individual, creative interpretation can be a prologue for patterns of thinking for enhancing life for mankind.

The program provides a source of exciting, captivating, meaningful reading materials for group participation, individual pleasure, and bulletin board displays. Children who have good feelings about themselves and their classroom relationships with each other esteem and enjoy what others in their group say and write. When these expressions are made into displays, collections of stories and poems, and books, illustrated by the young authors, they are read, and re-read, eagerly, with understanding, gratification, and appreciation.

The program diminishes the gap between our "ideals" of democracy in classrooms and the actual practices therein. Values stressed and held in high regard in a creative writing program are the same values generally regarded as characteristic of the good citizen paragon in a democracy. Emphasis is upon progress of individuals according to their own, innate growth patterns, independence in thought and action, whole-hearted commitment to concepts under study, security in self-concept, openness to perception, possession of theoretical and aesthetic values, and the conviction of the worth and significance of creative effort.

#### Classroom Behavior: The Critical Review

In the classroom, sensitivity to children's interests and needs results in concern for all pupils. Concern for all engenders a climate conducive to involvement by all. A genuinely successful creative writing-reading program is marked by the day-to-day, spontaneous, enthusiastic, excellent reading by the pupils who are taking part in it. Learning processes become more important than some vague end-product; they are life, itself, being lived now, dynamically and dramatically.

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