

Creative Writing: Painting Pictures with Words

Laura Copeland*

Cleaning the slate: making space for voices and ideas

Before pen meets paper. Before ideas get translated into words. Before topics are chosen. Before...before...before any academic activity happens in class, the first concept of writing I try to teach is that individual interpretations, opinions and beliefs are invaluable. I assure students that they do not have to agree with one another on issues, and they certainly need not agree with me. The most important thing is that they have their own ideas and not waver in their opinions, even if they are the only person in the class who has that opinion. Students often join a writing class rather timidly and slightly overwhelmed at the daunting task producing written work; work which they sometimes feel outclassed, unqualified and inferior in their ability to do well, especially in a second language.

“I’m not good at writing.” I hear this all the time and read it on questionnaires I give to students the first day of class. “I’m not good at grammar.” Indeed English grammar is difficult, especially when writers must conform to the rigid rules and established conventions of formal writing assignments. Despite these student judgments about their personal writing abilities, everyone has something to say. Getting students to believe in themselves and their ideas is the foundation for a successful class. When they believe in themselves and their individual ideas, then they feel more confident about expressing themselves, both orally and on paper. As their ideas are coming out, they are learning to say things, and they begin to notice the importance of *how* to say things. *What* we say and *how* we say it are as unique and individual as our fingerprints.

Talking is a catalyst for writing. Once ideas have been verbally articulated, we start learning to say things on paper - and the focus is on *how* to say things: we begin learning how to put our individual fingerprints on our work.

Abstract

This article is a summary of a creative writing workshop given at the 12th International Conference of NELTA. The article gives an overview of the author’s teaching philosophy on writing. The article then discusses certain strategies for teaching creative writing and provides sample classroom activities which were demonstrated at the NELTA conference presentation.

* Mr Copeland teaches at Kwansei Gakuin University Nishinomiya, Japan.

Colouring outside the lines: formal writing vs. creative writing

We must teach formal writing skills to our students. We must teach them the rules. We must teach grammar. We must teach organization and structure. We must teach, and enforce, the rights and wrongs of formal writing - anything less is a disservice to our students. If our students can communicate well in formal written English, then they will have opportunities for further education and better employment.

However, the creative writing class is not a class in which I impose rules. Rather, it is a place of written exploration and free expression. Anything is ok. I believe this type of freedom allows young writers the opportunity to experiment with writing and become confident and comfortable expressing themselves in the written word. This confidence will ultimately lead to improving all aspects of their writing, including their formal writing skills.

When students realize that they do not need to colour within the lines, or adhere to certain rules and conventions, there is no fear of making mistakes – there are no mistakes to be made because there are no rules. Their work is not “wrong.” They begin to take chances and challenge themselves. They begin to read their work aloud to the class. Class discussions become livelier and take more time. Everyone has something to say, and everyone believes in what she or he is saying. As the semester continues, I find myself doing less and less of the talking. Discussion is brimming with the personal opinions and colourful musings of confident writers.

The art of description is a lifelong process. To say things without saying things (show, don't tell) is an aspect of creative writing that is forever being shaped and re-shaped by our experiences in life, especially as we communicate these experiences via the five senses such as sight, sound, taste and touch (O'Conner, 1957).

One way, I begin to teach description is through poetry and the five senses. Initially most students have no belief in their ability to write a poem. They thought that poetry, and poems, is what professional

writers do, not them. And not in a second language. But much to their surprise, with a little scaffolding, they will soon be creating amazing images – three dimensional pictures of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Below is a model for learning to write poetry that I found on the internet. For this example, the topic of spring is used; however, you can easily substitute different topics depending on classroom interests. The point is students learn to communicate and describe things through the five senses.

Spring...

Spring comes _____

It looks like _____

And it sounds like _____

It smells like _____

Sometimes it tastes like _____

And I can touch (feel) _____

The initial descriptions might be a bit broad and vague. For example, one student wrote, “It smells like flowers”. If the students are using broad words, ask them questions which help them to think more specifically and descriptively.

So I asked, “What do flowers smell like?”

He replied, “Fresh. Green.”

“What kind of flowers?”

“Roses.”

“What do roses smell like?”

“Hmm, roses,” we both laughed.

“What color of roses do you like?”

“Pink. Red is love. It's too strong. White is plain.”

“That's cool. And pink is good because it can mean love that's love for anybody, not just a romantic thing. It's kind of light, ya know. It could go either way.”

He agreed, “It's not too serious if I give her pink roses. If I give her red roses she thinks I want to marry her.”

“Yep,” I grinned. “So spring smells like light, or how about soft, pink roses.”

“Yeah, like an Indian princess would have.” And then he clapped his hands and exclaimed, “It smells like the soft pink roses of an Indian princess!”

Very nice!

Mixing the palette: lesson ideas

During the first few weeks of class, most of my students tend to be more comfortable describing their images verbally rather than through the written word. Again, I think this is part of their initial insecurity that they do not believe themselves to be writers. I also believe that, especially as second language learners, they have had much more practice with spoken English than they have had with written English. So between writing English and speaking English, they are naturally more comfortable speaking. This proves to be advantageous because again, my first concern is to get them talking. We therefore begin learning how to say things via oral exercises in storytelling and then proceed to written descriptions.

Storytelling

As a warm-up for this exercise, I brainstorm with the class synonyms for *big*. Then I say, “Bob Sapp is a big man.” Actually, he is a very big man¹, but that sentence is very boring. Then I proceed to describe Bob’s bigness via the five senses. I do not use the word *big*; rather, I *show* his bigness. The students are able to see his bigness. Then, in their small groups, they must do the same type of description with *crazy*. Once they have talked through their ideas and images in small groups, I have the entire class stand up and form a circle. We proceed to go around in the circle telling a story about a crazy person – what a crazy person looks like, sounds like, tastes like, smells like, and what a crazy person does. The one rule is: you cannot use the word *crazy*.

Students are free to say as much as they want. For some students, it is easy to say three or four lines of descriptions. For others, especially the shy students, one short description is their best effort. Regardless of how much or how little a student says, everyone

has spoken. It is always a victory when every student in the class says something. For our debrief we talk about the things they did well. For example, how they were able to use connecting words or make transitions from one scene to another, the creativity of their images, and of course the fact that no one said *crazy*; rather, everyone *showed* crazy. We also discuss what they would do differently if they were to do this exercise again.

Having students reflect on their work is a great lesson about critical thinking and the learning process. Debrief and reflection teach our students to think about not only what they can do to improve their work but it also encourages them to celebrate the things they do well.

Jigsaw words

For this exercise, I give the students a sheet of words. They cut out the words they want to use and create a story/poem by adding their own words to complete their narrative. Jigsaw is a good form of scaffolding. It primes the students’ imaginations with words and images. Sometimes, the hardest part of writing is coming up with the first word. Students can feel overwhelmed looking at a blank sheet of paper. With jigsaw, there are many words to choose from, and ideas begin to coagulate.

Student example: “silence” by Maiko and Akisa

When he comes in the midnight
We sleep as we wear polka-dot pajamas
We are wishing sweet dreams,
But we are restless

He puts some cookies and toys
Oak tree giggles outside,
He whispers shh in the wind
He goes into a blanket of stars

That’s Christmas.

Last word/first word

I do this exercise in the large group because I want

¹ Bob Sapp is a famous MMA fighter in Japan. He is 6’5” tall (1.96m) and weighs 350lbs (160kg).

all the students to participate in the large group. A public act of writing allows students to become more comfortable sharing their writing with the class. Of course, there are initial feelings of nervousness and apprehension. But they all have to do it – this creates solidarity among the class members. Large group exercises create opportunities for a class to come together, have a shared experience, and encourage each other. They learn to trust themselves and trust one another.

One student comes up with a sentence or phrase and writes it on the board. The following student begins the next line with the last word of the previous sentence or phrase. For the example below, it was quite coincidental that the poem opened and closed with the first line. However, it is a nice example of coming full circle with an idea.

Following is a class example (The luminary is an annual illumination of holiday lights. It is in remembrance of the 6,000 people who lost their lives during the 1995 Kobe earthquake):

Nothing is beautiful
Beautiful luminary
Luminary is crowded
Crowded are the leaves of Sakura
Sakura is fragile
Fragile is snow
Snow blankets the earth
Blanketing the earth is sky
Sky is endless
Endless is life
Life is priceless
Priceless is beautiful
Beautiful is nothing
Nothing is beautiful

Canvases for honouring student work

As our students write, and learn to write well and in

confidence, we should celebrate their writing. Make it a habit to display their work. Displaying student work has several positive impacts on individual students and the classroom community. As showing their work becomes a natural habit for them, the students become more comfortable publicly talking about their work. In addition, when students see and read each other's work, they can provide one another with wonderful praise and applause. With such positive peer encouragement, students are motivated to continue challenging themselves to take chances and improve their writing.

Making copies of their work and reading their work to the class encourages everyone to believe that they are indeed writers. If students lack confidence in themselves as writers, passing out a neatly typed copy of their work to the class often adds credibility to not only their ideas but also to the belief that they are a writer.

One of my students who was a very gifted writer, yet painfully shy, rarely spoke in class. While reading her work I was always frustrated at why this smart, thoughtful, creative young woman was not sharing her ideas with the class. She had so many wonderful insights to share. As writers, we could all benefit from hearing her voice. And she as a writer could grow so much if she would share her thinking and writing with the class. So as we were studying how to write conclusions, I typed her example of a conclusion and passed it out to the class. In the following days, she began to volunteer to read her work. Each time she volunteered, she read more and more. On the last day of class, she volunteered to read her entire story. It was marvellous! The story, yes it was marvellous... but her voice, confidently reading her own work that was marvellous!

Conclusion: a work in progress

We are all writers. We all have something to say. Creating space for different voices in our class honours our students' individual thinking and encourages them to have confidence in their own ideas and opinions. With this freedom and confidence, students can approach writing and writing assignments with less fear of failure and more enthusiasm for writing.

As students experience success in creative writing, the confidence and skills they learn can be easily transferred to formal writing. The rules of formal writing become less intimidating. Students view the rules as helpful guidelines instead of unreasonable restrictions. The rules are not silencing writing voices; rather, organization, grammar, and structure are boundaries in which individual expression and thought are contained.

Writing, like all other art, takes time to develop and mature. It is a process. Just as we grow and mature as individuals, we grow and mature as writers. Even though most people greatly appreciate museum masterpieces, one would not criticize a five year old on her elementary artwork by harshly comparing her

picture to a Van Gogh or Matisse. Similarly, we must not be overcritical of our students' creative writing. Whether they are struggling novices or seasoned veterans, we must encourage our students in every stage of who they are as writers. We must create a classroom where students can find, and develop, their writing voice, and have confidence expressing their ideas – a place where they can paint their own pictures in their own words.

Reference

- O'Connor, F. (ed.). 1957. *Mystery and Manners*. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus & Girov.