

Creative Writing to Hone Academic and Life Skills

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Abstract: Foreign languages are of particular interest to students nowadays, since they help them achieve life goals such as studying abroad or obtaining well paid jobs. In this context the focus in language teaching is often on developing exam skills rather than life skills. Creative writing is the Cinderella of the school curriculum while academic writing in the form of essays, reports, proposals, and formal letters occupies the centre of the stage. However, creative writing is very effective in honing the same academic skills and in equipping students with much needed life skills.

“How useful is what I teach?” is one of the questions that a teacher endeavours to answer most frequently. More often than not this ubiquitous question is phrased as “Should I teach for an exam or for life?” What benefits students most in terms of exam results does not always coincide with what assists them in becoming balanced autonomous individuals that display courage and independence in life. However, both students and parents are on many occasions exam focused, to make no mention of school curriculum and academic culture in general which tend to measure the quality of education by the number of prizes in competitions and high grades in national exams. Although obtaining a Cambridge certificate may prove to be a great advantage for students, and as teachers we want our students to have every possible advantage when they leave school and enter life, many English teachers feel that the purpose of education lies beyond the above mentioned esteemed diploma. A good teacher may see the aim of education as twofold- firstly we would like our lessons to hone skills that will enable students to further their academic education, and secondly we attempt to equip learners with a set of abilities that lead to self-knowledge and self-discovery. This article will argue that while academic writing leads to the former, creative writing is the easiest path to explore the latter, but eventually achieve both.

Creative Writing versus Academic Writing

Creative writing, loosely defined by some as literature, applies to a process of self-expression where no strict rules are needed, other than to produce original pieces. It is the very opposite of technical, academic writing, based on specific guidelines, where the writer knows exactly what to write in the introduction, how to develop an idea and connect ideas in and within paragraphs and how to summarize key points in the conclusion. The main difference between the two types of writing lies in the intention of the author. Creative writers attempt mainly to entertain the reader and, if the writer is good, to construct an experience the reader can identify with, to express a universal human truth, to send a message. They demand their piece of writing to stand by itself and to have the power to repeat and recreate feelings within the readers. Academic writers tackle a truth of a logical or scientific nature. They formulate a thesis and defend it. They seek to be intellectually rather than emotionally persuasive. As such, academic writing is restrictive, whereas creative writing allows the author infinite freedom. Another important distinction which derives from intent is style. Whereas academic writing demands accuracy and concision, creative writing allows for playfulness and merrymaking.

Undervalued/invaluable benefits of creative writing

The advantages of creative writing are not easily observable from an academic writing viewpoint. At first sight creative writing encourages its practitioners to indulge in loose structure, long sentences and disruptive figures of speech such as epithets, similes, metaphors, hyperbole. At closer inspection, the practice does lead not only to balanced individuals, but also to more articulate writers of structured texts. Firstly, despite what some may believe, creative writing does not involve only imagination and creativity. Instead, it entails the constant use of a variety of thought processes. In the course of creative writing, students attempt to be original, to seek for less common words or collocations to express their ideas, to encounter solutions to characters' problems, to find surprising connections between events, to suggest a range of alternatives and directions for a given situation, in short to understand the intricacies of both external events and the human mind. These result in general cognitive development, particularly in the acquisition of organizational, analytical and persuasive skills. And what proves more serviceable in academic writing than organization, analysis and persuasion? Moreover, the quest for structure and logic within the fictional reality leads to discipline, an invaluable life skill.

Apart from the cognitive profit, there are emotional benefits to be reaped from creative writing. Most preteens and teenagers experience difficulty identifying their own emotions and

display intense awkwardness whenever required to express their feelings. Creative writing mimics real life situations where characters are faced with choices, much like the options students are challenged with in real life. Through creative writing students have a safe environment to contemplate, explore and finally articulate their feelings. They do so behind a character's mask and without having to assume responsibility or without exposing any vulnerability. Nevertheless they benefit from the readers' feedback or reactions and are able to distil a code of values valid for the real world. Such clarity of opinion will serve students immensely whenever they undertake academic writing. Moreover, it is a forum for self-assertion where students can find their own voice, yet another precious life ability.

Last but not least, writing is first and foremost a process of creation of a new/fictional/alternative universe in the course of which the author may be forced to identify with both the hero and the villain, to grasp the depths of both good and evil. Therefore, while they focus on understanding the perspective of the other, writers develop empathy and communication skills that they can transfer from fiction to areas of life such as profession or family and friends.

These are but a few of the invisible benefits of creative writing which may ease the path towards structured writing for our students. Finding a voice of their own, being assertive and confident, improving organization and analysis and finally articulating feelings and discovering empathy are abilities that students rarely get the chance to train in every day school life. While the above mentioned aptitudes are not among the aims and objectives of the curriculum, they are a precondition of satisfaction and success in life and are within easy reach of students and teachers through such a simple exercise as the constant practice of creative writing.

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