Away with Words: Teaching Creativity in the Classroom

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Faced with a blank piece of paper, a time limit, and a vague instruction to write a story about a time we were scared, most of us would struggle. If writing feels forced, students sometimes resort to the kind of stories we read far too often; the ones that start on a dark night in the woods, the ones that have an uncanny resemblance to Call of Duty 3, and the ones that turn out to be bad dreams. So, how do we move students away from this kind of writing? How do we help them take risks?

Two things seem to make a big difference in teaching creativity. One is posing the right questions. I would argue it is more about the ‘why’ than the ‘where’, the ‘who’ or the ‘when’—presenting any picture of a man (be he a fisherman or a businessman) and saying, ‘He was the world’s worst magician. Why?’ is more interesting than asking, ‘Who is he and what he is doing?’ It is almost like leading students into a dark wood and asking them to find their way out by following a dusting of cake crumbs on the ground—he’s already a bad magician, how and why did he get to this point? The other thing is finding the right stimulus, and the following are some ideas which might spark some creative responses.

Images

Images can conjure a setting and mood, and spark curiosity in students. Photographs are wonderful as they are a snapshot of a moment, and students seem to respond well if the teacher has taken the photograph. When teaching travel writing or descriptive writing, I have used an image of an elderly Vietnamese woman asleep in a food market, lying on a rickety bench—a still, solitary figure in the midst of a riot of colour, noises and exotic vegetables. Photographs can be unveiled gradually—a square at a time—to provoke predictions as to the scene that lies beneath, encouraging students to look closely at details they may otherwise gloss
over. In the same activity an ambiguous first line could be given: ‘It was the shape of a half moon,’ leading students to decide what in the scene could be this shape—the woman’s crimson toe nail? The bamboo basket of silvery fish? The green banana? Getting them to think about precise detail in this way leads to a much richer and more interesting description.

Discussion of the identity of a man in a dinosaur suit triggered ideas about a failed superhero, a prank gone wrong, a lonely part time job, an escaped convict, and a children’s entertainer on the edge—all interesting possible storylines. Needless to say, pictures have many uses in the classroom as they can enliven analysis too: asking students to link images to particular poems and other texts can spark fruitful debate. On one day of teaching I used the same images for several different lessons and asked how they could be linked to the texts being studied—it is incredible how a dung beetle shunting a tight ball of dung up a mound, an air balloon floating in a blue sky, a ship in a bottle, and a single oak tree in a field can be linked to texts as diverse as Of Mice and Men, Hamlet and The Kite Runner. The dung beetle especially gets imaginative responses—with a GCSE class studying Of Mice and Men it represented George being burdened with Lennie, Curley’s wife’s difficult relationship with her husband, the struggle of itinerant workers during the depression, and the rural idyll some of the characters dream of (manure being seen in a healthy pastoral way in this case!)

**Sound and music**

Soundscapes are also evocative and engaging, especially if the teacher does not reveal the place where the sounds are emanating from. BBC Radio 4 did an excellent series called Lend Me Your Ears, in which Fiona Shaw recreated the world that would have been familiar to Charles Dickens as he walked the streets of London, observing the sights and sounds of the
city. Described as sounding ‘like the swell of the sea surge, beating upon a pebbly shore,’ London was an incredibly noisy place, and it is possible to listen to the recreated sound of horses neighing and clopping over pebbles, street hawkers selling their wares, and carriage wheels creaking with their loads.

Playing sound without images works with films too—the opening sequence of Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West* is fantastic for writing suspenseful, detailed descriptions. Other scenes from films which could spark stories are: the robbery near the beginning of *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, the moments of panic before the source of the fear is revealed in *Cloverfield* and the scenes of entrapment in *127 Hours*.

Another useful tool for inspiring stories is a song with an ambiguous narrative. The Killers’ ‘Mr Brightside’ often leads to stories of love, madness and rejection, and is unexpectedly useful for its unreliable narrator, whilst The Beatles’ ‘She came in through the bathroom window’ and ‘Eleanor Rigby’ pose more questions than they answer. I get them to write down their questions, so for ‘She came in through the bathroom window’ they could consider: why doesn’t she go through the front door? Who is she? Where has she been? Is she looking for something?

**Word play**

Opening a dictionary on three random pages and selecting three words which must then be put into the first line of a story gets all kinds of responses. For example, in one lesson the words ‘passenger’, ‘manacle’, and ‘stagger’, became

A few minutes after dawn, the manacled passenger staggered towards the border while clouds of dust closed down on him.

Other words which have worked well are ‘menagerie’, ‘mandolin’ and ‘tremble’:

After violent thunderstorms had stirred the beasts of the menagerie into a frenzy, leaving their keepers trembling, only Baldini’s mandolin playing could soothe them.

The most fun comes when the students select their own words. Stipulating that one word must be a verb tends to get better results.
Using objects

Three seems to be the magic number when it comes to inspiring writing: presenting three objects (anything lying around the house) and saying that they all came from a character’s home or pocket is another way of teaching creativity—after all any character with a shell, a deerstalker hat and an orange must have an interesting background. The objects can be used as a springboard for an opening again and it tends to be better if they don’t go for their first idea. The temptation is to have a fruit-loving detective solving a crime involving a shell, but the following is much a more original opening:

Lottie had two options for covering the shock of recently dyed orange (it said ‘burnt amber’ on the packet) hair: either the shell scarf or the deerstalker hat. Neither was ideal…”

The media

Newspapers are a rich source of potential stories too. The six year old sweethearts in Germany who tried to run away for an African honeymoon and nearly got to the airport on their own with sunglasses, a pink blow-up lilo and a suitcase on wheels, is just brilliant. Another curious story is the tale of a Cambodian woman, Rochom P’ngieng, who emerged from the jungle where it appeared she had been living for 18 years, and was labelled by the world’s media as ‘Mowgli Girl’ in 2007. Experimenting with point of view is a possibility here: students can write the story from the perspective of the police chief who finds the girl (‘She was tugging at the chain again’ was one opening), or they can write as a third person omniscient narrator (I ask them to read the article for ‘killer lines’ which they can use and one they often like to start with is ‘her eyes were red like tiger’s eyes’).

Recreating a text

‘Crunching’ a text sounds complicated but it is worth it. All being well (it is easier than it sounds) you’ll end up with an intriguing list of words the students can play with—the opening to Dickens’s *Hard Times* has words threaded together like: ‘day down dye elephant’, ‘machinery madness melancholy monotonously’, ‘piles piston purple ran rattling red river savage serpents smoke’, and ‘town trailed trembling uncoiled unnatural’. The students’ challenge is to use only the words given to create a new description, or use the words to inspire the opening of a
story. One student came up with this opening, a fire ravaged setting:

A long red serpent trailed down the black, ill-smelling river as ashes ran trembling in the smoke.

Another focused on the images of a polluted town:

Chimneys of black brick stood tall in the savage madness, and smoke uncoiled like unnatural serpents out of the windows.

Any short, evocative piece of text works. Others to try include: the opening of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* with its wonderful description of a humid ‘brooding’ Indian monsoon, full of mangoes, crows, ‘glittering sunshine’ and ‘fatly baffled’ bluebottles; the opening of Michael Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* which details a filthy, dung-filled London where ‘sleet stings your cheeks, sharp little spits of it so cold they feel hot, like fiery cinders in the wind’; and the opening of Barbara Kingsolver’s *Poisonwood Bible* with its depiction of a Congolese forest with ‘poisonous frogs, war-painted like skeletons’. The activity could be done with other kinds of text, for example a speech from *King Lear* or a Sylvia Plath poem. It can also be done as a starter before an analysis lesson to get students thinking about semantic fields and imagery.

**Original description of Coketown from Hard Times:**

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness.
Enjoying it

Visiting writers have always encouraged me to try writing while the students are (something that is more practical with some classes than others), and to share the challenges I faced with them as part of discussion. Creativity is all about trying new things and not being afraid of failing, and by joining in ourselves we model to students that writing need not be a dreaded, forced activity of blank paper filling, but rather one which is liberating and enjoyable.

References

2. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=bW-jSa9_k3M.
4. The link to the article is http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/jan/19/cambodia.
5. Essentially it involves using Microsoft Word to put a text into alphabetical order as a way of seeing it in a completely new way. Go to the ‘Replace’ button under the ‘Home’ tab and type a space into the ‘Find what’ box and ‘^p into the ‘Replace with’ box. This will put the words in the document into a list. Then alphabetize them (the AZ↓ button) and finally reverse the process, so ‘^p in the ‘Find what’ box and a space in the ‘Replace with’ box. Or use Wordle™ available at http://www.wordle.net/create.