

Teacher Inquiry Project

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TE 848: Writing Instruction and Assessment

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Proposal

Question: What are the best strategies for helping students leave their comfort zones in terms of creative styles of writing?

Reflection: Teaching ELA, literature courses, and writing courses in the past, I've found that when I want to give students more freedom and space to write creatively, many of them still focus on surface-level topics. While for some students I know this is just their personality type, for many I believe it is more due to the fact that they believe their writing has to fit a certain mold, and they are afraid to take risks. I'd love to be able to encourage more creativity and individuality in my students' writing.

Part One

Beaton, A. (2010). Student Choice in Writing: Reflections on One Teacher's Inner Struggle to Relinquish Control. *Schools: Studies in Education*, 7(1), 111-121. doi:10.1086/651296

- In Beaton's text, she uses scenarios that actually occurred in her own classroom to discuss her difficult relationship with student choice in writing. Should teachers learn to better relinquish control, or can students not fully be trusted to write about difficult topics in the classroom?
- What drew me to this text was that I have often felt the same mixed emotions as the author. Especially as English teachers, our students often choose to share experienced traumas with us through their writing. It also forced me to think about how limiting students' writing can unintentionally force my own social and class values onto my classroom.

Olmo, B. (1980). Techniques to Develop Creative Writing. *The Clearing House*, 53(6), 278-280. Retrieved April 5, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/30197892](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30197892)

- This article discusses different methods for cultivating creativity in student writing. Amongst the strategies they discuss are: brainstorming strategies, instructor-given clues as inspiration for story writing, and group writing.
- This source raised some obvious ideas that connect with my question, such as brainstorming before writing. However, the article also suggested new ways in which I could implement these strategies in my classroom. The article also made me consider using more group-based creative tasks as a means to encourage inspiration in student writing.

Rinkevich, J. (2011). Creative Teaching: Why it Matters and Where to Begin. *The Clearing House*, 84(5), 219-223. Retrieved April 5, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/41304376](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41304376)

- In this article, the author advocates for creative teaching practices, as they often lead to better and more creative products from students. In addition, it identifies the barriers to creativity that can arise in the classroom, allowing teachers to clear an educational path for their students.
- This article pointed out that one of the main barriers to student creativity in the classroom was a subconscious desire of teachers to try to maintain conformity, especially in the face of things like standardized tests and unmanageable class sizes. This allowed me to reflect on my own possible lack of support for student creativity.

Part Two

Creative writing is not a topic into which I often delve in the courses I teach. Much of this is related to the standards that students are assessed on throughout the year; however, I cannot place all of the blame here. Part of the lack of creative writing in my classes is due to my own uncertainty about the best way to engage my students in it as well as my questioning of whether or not limits should be drawn on what they write. The texts I used in my research helped me think more deeply about these indecisions and reflect on their effects on my practice.

One area that I had not considered much in regard to my students' creative writing was my own influence on their creative processes. Of course, in some ways this is obvious. If a teacher doles out highly specific writing prompts and instructions, students will only be able to produce so much. However, upon reflection I realized that even when I was giving students "choice", I could still be hindering their creativity. As an example, in the past I had my Language & Literature 10th graders participate in National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) as part of a creative writing unit. I let them choose the topics they wanted for their novels, and then conferenced with each individual as they worked on the drafts. As teenagers tend to do, many of them chose rather sensitive topics for their novels such as assault, mental health issues, and suicide. With a couple of students, I asked them to essentially water down certain chapters because the topics were very difficult. After reading Beacon's text especially, I now question my motives here. Was I really worried for my students? Or was I just uncomfortable discussing depression with the whole group? In the future, I would still do this project; however, I think I would build in several lessons addressing the idea of sensitive topics in literature and writing. If I were upfront with my students, I believe I could explain to them where my concerns came from and trust them to tell the stories they want responsibly. This is especially important to me because I have seen so many instances of students expressing their own trauma through writing, and I would not want to eliminate that option for them.

Another idea from my research that intrigued me was the process of group writing activities. During my writer's workshops, my students are typically working independently up until the revising and editing processes begin. At that time, I have them read others' work and give suggestions and constructive feedback to peers. At this point, however, the students' mindsets are fairly set on what they are doing. Their willingness to reflect and make substantial changes has passed because they have already invested so much into what they have created. Because of this set mindset, the writing process is not particularly collaborative. I want to encourage my students to work together more, especially on creative tasks which is why the idea of group writing is particularly appealing. My grade 8 and 9 Language Acquisition students have a unit in which we learn about different forms of communication through the lens of environmental issues. One of their summative assessments is to communicate about these issues with a younger audience, so they create their own original children's book to read to 2nd graders at our school. This project has worked well in the past, and it gives students a chance to engage in our school community. In order to promote more collaboration between my students, I want to rework the assessment so that students can create their children's books in small groups. This would not only encourage students to talk through their ideas with others with a more open mind, but it could also help engage students who often find themselves with writer's block.

Originally when I considered my inquiry questions, my thought process had been focused on how my students were not engaging creatively in their writing. My research has made it clearer to me that, while students' engagement and willingness to participate is important, there are also major implications for how I address and support creativity in my classroom. By being more open to a variety of topics and encouraging more collaborative writing processes in my classroom, I hope to facilitate more creative thinking and engagement in my students' writing.