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Inclusive Education: Creative Writing For All.

Abstract :

The struggle for full inclusion is an ongoing challenge. It is assumed that all members of society should be given the opportunity to express themselves through the medium of their choice, but the assumption is rarely practiced. In this paper I will examine the ways in which this assumption can be challenged.

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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

CREATIVE WRITING FOR ALL.

ABSTRACT

The struggle for full inclusion is an ongoing challenge. It is assumed that all members of society should be given the opportunity to express themselves through the medium of their choice, but the assumption is rarely practiced. It is evident that barriers to inclusion are erected within many educational institutions, motivated by fear and ignorance; fear of losing control and ignorance of the facts, which allow an acceptance of difference. These facts may include: students do understand and listen, they can communicate their ideas, and they are willing to take part. It is also evident that individuals labeled with learning difficulties and/or learning disabilities are excluded from expressing their creative writing abilities. This is exemplified as more and more students are placed within institutions and discrete settings, unable to participate in the educational provisions/opportunities of their choice. The choice could mean that they do not wish to participate in creative writing or creative thinking, but at least they have been given the opportunity to take part in their own decision making process. It is important that individuals are able to express themselves more freely. In one sense this will assist in their development as human beings and, educationally, it will stimulate ideas and in another, perhaps more significant, in a sense they will have fun realizing their potentials.

INTRODUCTION:

Creative Writing for ALL is aimed towards challenging our assumptions of difference. It is a human condition that individuals are able to express their thoughts and feelings in many different ways. For example, Stuart who is labeled with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, expressed his feelings when he was asked how he felt after dancing for the first time with a female companion; "...I was frightened...it was like thunder and lightning..." His fear stemmed from experiencing passion for the first time and through passion Stuart was able to communicate his feelings to others in a creative way.

Stuart recently attended, along with nine of his colleagues, a poetry class, which began with a discussion about their experiences of school. They were asked; "in what way are your senses provoked?" for example, the smell of school dinners, the colour of the school walls, the taste of puddings, sweets and the touch of chalk on the blackboard? It was something as awful as the taste and smell of school dinners, which provoked a few passionate responses! Colours too, play an important role in stimulating responses in relation to the symbols they represent such as the red rose, green grass and the yellow sun. Although colours can play an important part in the creative process, students were also asked to give life to inanimate objects, or to use the device of personification. Again, this was a strange and new way for students to express themselves uniquely. This is getting away from the usual method of introducing rhythm and rhyme into the classroom, but not to dismiss it, it will be practical and necessary to use all figurative devices within the context of a creative curriculum. However, many of the poems, written by students previously thought as uneducable, have been produced through working with colours and other figurative devices to stimulate their responses and they have created new and exciting ways of communication.

WHAT IS CREATIVITY?

Introducing creativity to any particular group is a daunting and challenging task. It is daunting because of the way people react in different ways to personal feelings and it is challenging for both tutor and student, tapping into previously restrained or forgotten emotions. Creativity, in its broadest sense, can be as simple as making a meal or dressing one's self appropriately. It is the

ways we present the meal on the plate, which makes it look interesting and/or appetizing. Dressing appropriately can also be creative, as, for instance, the pop star who turned up for his audition in a green suit, holding an orange in one hand and an umbrella in the other...it certainly created an unusual entrance and created an opportunity for him to become lead singer of *Erasure*. Being creative, then, is not just about being different; it's about stimulating the senses in order to provoke a response.

These provoked responses however, vary in relation to the type of creative activity. For example, the creative art of making a meal is subject to many variables – the type of meal, taste, style, presentation etc. Therefore, the meal is *judged* through subjective means – *one mans meat is another mans poison* – as the cliché suggests. If the testing is referred to poetry, a sense of tradition is added to the menu and it is tradition which sets the standards, such as the Shakespearean canon. Thus, judging creative writing depends upon the comparisons to what has gone before. T.S. Eliot described this process of creative thought as not wholly original, but something that has been changed slightly from previous works or forms. Eliot espouses his theory as '*intertextuality*', which is the use of a theme, plot, story or character that has already been used before and changed slightly to create the impression of originality. A good example of intertextuality can be seen in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, which is taken from the Biblical story of Herod, who beheads John the Baptist for the sake of seeing the seductive Salome dance for him. Yet, the story is a vehicle for Wilde to carry his poetic prose in an original way.

However, it was Eliot (et al), who set the standards of modern poetry, using their influence through Faber & Faber to distinguish what was acceptable – unacceptable (in literary circles) as good poetry. This produced poetry of a high standard, but at the same time excluded the majority of poets, belonging to a class of mainstream expression. Although this expression is thriving today, there still remains an elitist view that poetry should remain in the domain of the few academics of the literary world (*the gatekeepers*). They are responsible for the continuum of intertextuality within a small literary circle, alluding to each other's works, distinguishing what is *good* and omitting what is deemed as *bad*.

There is, nevertheless, a strong opinion that suggests all creative works are judged on merit and it seems there is a subjective streak in all of us, which can accept or dismiss a work of art, a poem, a novel or a film. If responses to a work of art are *good*, they usually satisfy a subjective criterion; although they may not necessarily be limited by the demands of logic and reality, they are responsive to a wide variety of judgemental standards. (Jackson & Messick 1965). The varieties of standards we tend to set are based on previously held assumptions, or perceptions of what is creative. For example, we need to make comparisons to other types of creative activity. In this sense we compare its originality, or its novelty, but as we have seen, being completely novel is only an illusion. Comparing one creative work to another must depend upon their similar artistic nature, or *domain*, such as a Monet to a Renoir. The idea of comparison also depends upon how the creative work *fits* within the domain. For example, the product must fit into the context of its own domain through being appropriate and not merely a reproduction of a previous model nor a bizarre representation. This produces a kind of unusual quality or a unique product. In works of art, poetry for that matter, its unique qualities stand the test of time and can transform into lasting images; something which we are able to return to again and again that gives the same or added pleasure. The criterion of transformation is more difficult to define than are those of unusualness and appropriateness. At first glance it might seem to be nothing more than an extreme example of unusualness. But it is unusualness with a difference; it is an aggressive unusualness that attacks conventional ways of thinking about things or of viewing objects (Dicky 1963). In this sense, the product may change the way we think about things or the way we view the world, such as the novels of Dickens or the poetry of Wilfred Owen; they make us reflect and wonder.

CREATIVE OPPORTUNITY:

For those of us who are able to wonder and reflect upon an individual's creativity is a reaction to something personal and extremely precious for the creator. But within creative writing/communication, in general, there are too, flashes of inspiration, or moments of *aggressive unusualness*. This, in part, stems from a *strong self-image*, which distinguishes creative people from other individuals. This is, of course, apt if the individual has been given the opportunity to be creative in the first place. For example, there are various traits, which creative

individuals tend to possess, including; *hard work, perseverance, capacity for solitude and instability*, amongst others. The latter has been evident in the creativity of Van Gough, who was labeled as schizoid and Michaelangelo and Balzac, who were labeled as manic-depressives. The opportunity was taken through their own tenacious personalities and a strong self-image, which brought them great dividends. Then we must ask ourselves, what of those individuals who have been refused, or denied the chance to be included in mainstream life and have/are segregated from expressing themselves in a creative way?

Judith Snow, a Canadian writer/author and exponent of *Inclusion*, maintains that; “*we are all unique and that we all possess gifts of one kind or another – what is lacking is the opportunity to express those unique gifts*”. The opportunity of expression falls within the domain of the school or further educational institutions and with the responsibility of the teacher or tutor. This responsibility is then narrowed further within the perimeters of the *National Curriculum* and various accreditations, which may assist in the decision making of the teacher/tutor. Stereotypes, too, become evident within the psyche and teachers may think in terms of ability and the success of certain gifted pupils/ students. Pupils and/or students may not even be given the opportunity of choice and may already be placed within a Special School (Statemented) or within Day Centre provision.

Expressing unique gifts, however, must begin with the actualization of our potentials, or being in possession of a strong self-image, or as Carl Rogers maintains, “...The mainspring of creativity appears to be...man’s tendency to actualize himself, to become his potentials”. (*A Theory of Therapy*). Changing our philosophies or assumptions of individuals labeled as *different* can develop this and allow the individual to become more confident. This is difficult when considering that once the individual has sufficiently been conditioned, (a self-fulfilling prophesy) that he/she is unable to perform certain tasks, it may be alarming for he/she to be told that he/she can now do them. Through positive reinforcement, it is possible to create a creative environment, where individuals are encouraged to think about themselves and others in a different way.

THE WRITING PROCESS – MOTIVATION:

Thinking in different ways is potentially difficult, but not impossible.

Students/individuals, labeled with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, have been conditioned not to think at all, for the best part of their lives, and to be asked to look at things in a new way may seem completely alien to them. This is integral to the full and honest education of all students and should at least be explored. However, students are being placed on vocational courses in colleges across the country. Their motivation is usually linked to ‘professional/experts’ who encourage individuals to move from Day-Centre care provision and onto vocational courses (for whatever reasons). One such student expressed her anger at being forced from day-centre care and into college. “I wasn’t asked about this”. This is not an argument against vocational courses, but it is, or should be a necessity to assess the needs of each individual and to perhaps ask what the student wants. *We aim for the moon and even if we miss, we are still amongst the stars.* This statement or aphorism is true for most of us aiming to improve our status in life. With this in mind, together with the philosophy of good practice, all students need to be asked the same question, “What do you want to do?” and how is it possible to take the subject from A to B? This simple philosophy is rarely practiced, but most teachers/tutors/trainers will say that they always ask, then why are we always returning to the same point? What shall we do about student A or B? They usually end up passing the student down the line. But what of the thoughts of the student? They can be creative if given the opportunity.

The idea of *Inclusion* is not to merely place a student into discrete provision within a college setting, but to offer choices and opportunities for the individual to succeed in their chosen field. The focus is on individuals, not on disabilities. It is professional determination to grant every student the greatest possible opportunity to achieve. (Bunch 1999). To this end, it is vital that the student’s needs are met first and this must be displayed in all considerations regarding the choice of placement.

Creating the opportunity for the student to achieve is only possible if the student is motivated. Motivating the students to participate in creative writing was not difficult, in the sense that they were already established on the course (*Adult Life Skills – Work Preparation and Basic skills Courses*). However, the students did present their feelings through their creative abilities and also through an evaluation of each lesson. They were asked if they enjoyed the lesson and asked why they enjoyed it. Their answers were constrained because they had not experienced creative writing before and were bereft of comparisons. In general, they thought the lesson (writing a group poem) was different, exciting; one reaction was that it was silly and meaningless. The students were also asked if they would participate in a creative writing class, (this question was asked to three different groups, a total of 28 students and their responses were overwhelmingly positive).

THE TEACHING ENVIRONMENT:

An *inclusive* environment would be the ideal setting to teach/encourage creative writing. The result for this project began within a *discrete* college setting, which was meant to be an *inclusive* environment. Initially my eagerness to teach poetry, as a strategy to put across *work-preparation*, was discouraged (Following my first lesson). The reason was, given from my mentor, that *I possessed a greater passion to teach poetry than the students had to learn it*, and, evidently, it wasn't part of the curriculum anyway. I acquiesced, knowing that the students *did in fact* enjoy it and that they had taken something useful from it. This I learned from a support worker, who approached me a couple of weeks later and saying that he thought a few of the students (surprisingly) '*understood what I was on about*'. The students were also responsive and took an active role in the group session. This encouraged a move towards creating, or developing a *creative* curriculum, which would enable students to learn through ideas based on their feelings and emotions; not play, but truthful thoughts that have been otherwise prevented from expression. This would include art and responses to the whole gamut of creativity, which may have only been introduced to students briefly at school or within their home environment.

The creative lessons, apart from the end-of-lesson diversions, began within the day-centre setting – *Orchard Mount Day Centre*. The opportunity arose from *covering* for regular absent tutors.

(The *Education classes* were mainly focused on literacy and numeracy, giving the students the chance to catch up on their Basic/Life Skills). Students came from varying backgrounds and were at different stages of learning. The first lesson was not thoroughly planned, but I had a thought that I would do something creative with the group.

Following an initial meeting with the *Day-Centre Manager*, I was told that the students had been working with colours; painting etc. This gave me an idea to write a group poem or at least something students could identify as their own work. However, the room itself was colourful, full of craftwork, clay models, paintings, sketches and needlework. The large windows gave a view of the Centre's grounds where there was plenty of *colour* to work with.

THE WRITING PROCESS – PREPARATION

I began the lesson by way of an informal introduction. This allowed for the opportunity to understand the particular strengths of each individual, and more importantly, to understand how best I could communicate ideas and images to those individuals. For example, I wanted to develop their awareness of colour, or to facilitate identification, which would hopefully lead to expression. From this expression would come emotion, a sense or feeling, which gives identity?

Communication is a two-way process and in the first instance I needed to create a sense of trust. I asked them what kind of work they had been doing, and using the room as a form of reference I could refresh their memories with the various examples of artwork they had created. This prompted a positive reaction. For example, the students' enjoyed the practical, *hands-on*, creative side of their work at the Centre and took pride in their achievements. It was relatively easy to draw out their feelings in relation to colours and how each colour held its own symbol or message to each of them on a personal basis.

The message each colour communicated was, surprisingly, different for each student. This is because the students' perceptions were new to them. For example, they held no previous words/vocabulary to describe how they felt about a particular colour, which disregarded cliché and, so each description was unique to them. As individuals they thought it strange that they had

to, or were asked to present an idea about something inanimate/abstract such as a colour. The question itself then seemed strange as it was communicated, “How does red make you feel?” or, “What does green taste like?” It was difficult to gain an immediate response and the question/answer changed to a discussion about past experiences. For example, students would begin to describe colours in terms of objects or memories, such as black would represent a funeral or an accident. The colour green or red were used as symbols of a favourite football team, or linked to a favourite park or flower. This was unexpected, but it was also logical to them in terms of comparable situations. The act of changing a colour into a thought or feeling seemed ridiculous to them and it made them laugh. The humour helped and I started to give examples of metaphor, which made them laugh louder, which caught the attention of the teacher in the adjoining classroom, who asked why they were laughing. I replied, “*Blue is a trumpet blowing in the sky*”. This was the line, which made them laugh, but it came from their imagination and was transformed along with other lines into a structured poem on the whiteboard. At this stage, the students were still unsure about what a poem actually was. I explained that they were *making something with words* – which derives from the *Greek (to make with words)*. This was reinforced with repetition of their personal feelings and statements about their chosen colour. This wasn’t necessarily their favourite colour, but a colour they had chosen from an arbitrary list. Choosing their colours in this way would prevent stereotyping. For example, they may have worked with favourite colours in the past in a creative workshop and may have confused that idea with the process of creating a poem.

OTHER GROUP POETRY:

The idea of colours was continued and was slightly adapted with other groups in Day Centre provision, such as *Craig Hall*. Here, the colours were more defined rather than arbitrary in order to stimulate certain responses. For example, the colour *purple* was introduced along with the primary colours, but only left perplexity amongst the students. It was necessary to give some examples of how the colour *purple* has been used to symbolize certain things like power and death. This was difficult because not all students had experienced or been in touch with colours in this way. Yet, when asked about the colours *pink* and *red*, they were able to respond with

romance and *love*. These colours are more often linked to greetings cards, especially on Valentine's Day.

The linking of colours to occasions allowed the students to express themselves, but their ideas became conventional or stereotypical and the outcome was less stimulating than from the first group. Something was also lost in the translation of the colours and their symbolic meanings. At this point it was necessary to revert back to the original model or strategy of deliverance where students were able to express their thoughts more imaginatively. The second group worked more as individuals in the sense that the finished poem was not a group effort, but was written separately as individual pieces. Although this was an important part of their Basic Skills tuition, it did detract from the essence of the session, which was to create an original piece that reflected a group process or actualization of something that they had themselves inspired.

The inspiration and motivational factors for the Basic Skills group, *Lower Broughton Access Centre*, was the introduction of a Poetry Competition. The incentive was that all poems would be published in a small anthology, but some students had already taken part in the colour poetry sessions, which helped them with the spelling and handwriting. The students were from various backgrounds and at different stages of their development, returning to education for many different reasons.

The development of their poetry had to be in conjunction with course work or the particular accreditation they were working towards, such as Wordpower, which incorporated the element, *convey ideas, feelings and emotions*, and was part of the *Communicate in Writing Unit*.

THE POETS:

Neil Gallagher is 22 years old. He lives with friends and carers in a residential home in Eccles, Manchester. Neil is originally from Ballykeeggs, County Donegal, Northern Ireland. He has four brothers and two sisters. His main interests are music, football and dancing. Currently, Neil is studying at City Campus, Salford College. His dream is to be a professional snooker player, but now he is concentrating hard on his studies. Neil is labeled with cerebral palsy.

Since Neil has been introduced to poetry, he has shown an awareness of the things around him that he used to ignore or think unimportant. Things like his home in Ireland, which he rarely visits, but with his writing he can visit as often as he likes.

Wesley Goodwin is twenty years old. He lives at home with his parents and brothers in Walkden, Manchester. His main interests are football and gardening. Wesley is a good communicator and is passionate about expressing his views on football, especially Manchester United. Wesley expressed his love of football in a poem, which captures the ups and downs of a passionate game between United and Liverpool.

Karen Donnelly lives in Salford. She has been interested in writing poems for a long time. She particularly enjoys writing about things from her childhood and remembers old nursery rhymes. Karen also has an interest in the history of Salford and captures old memories of this area in her poetry.

ORCHARD MOUNT DAY CENTRE:

Eight students dictated and structured their poem as a group. The title, *For Angie*, is dedicated to Christopher's girlfriend. The poem was based on their favourite colours, which they recognized, touched and discussed before giving their individual interpretation of each colour. One of my favourites is: *Red is hard tomatoes and blushing winds*.

2nd YEAR STUDENTS – CITY CAMPUS – SALFORD COLLEGE

The theme of colours is again prominent in this poem. The students named this poem *True Colours* and were proud of their efforts. Their discussions enabled them to explore their feelings and personalities, which became a challenging experience, but worthwhile as the poem suggests.

A SELECTION OF POEMS:

SPRING

The flowers are blooming from the ground
Watch them spreading all around
As they grow they raise their head
The very first sign of a flowerbed

Spring is here the children cheer
Baby lambs play in the field so near
The chicks are born small and sweet-
Tiny wings and little feet

By Karen Donnelly. Lower Broughton Access Centre, 1999

AS

As bold as children
As bright as daylight
As cold as a frosty night
As black as a black cat
As warm as toast.

By Michael. Salford College 1999

TRUE COLOURS

Red is cockeyed and showing off
Red apples are juicy
Blue is seasick and the sky is in mourning
But yellow is cheerful and shines out
Black as eyes and tired black suits.
Purple is peaceful lavender churches
Green is sloppy sticky things – touching hearts.

By 2nd Year Students, City Campus, Salford College 1999.

FOR ANGIE

Yellow is giddy
Yellow is watery
Red is hard tomatoes and blushing winds.
Green is grass tickling my feet.
Blue is a trumpet blowing in the sky

By The Education Group – Orchard Mount 1999
Students: Chris, Ian, Christine, Stephen, Lois and Anne.

POEM

Pink makes the blue sky warm.

By Debbie. Salford College. Craig Hall 1999.

A POEM

Aramore Island
Is a very nice area
Off the coast of Donegal,
Sea, salt wind.

Rushing your face is not far
From Keilly Beggs.
I am going home of St Pat's Day
To a band on the Island

I march on Wednesday 17th,
Bright green crowds of mad people, shamrocks,
Salmon and Irish dancing
Where children fish.

By Neil Gallagher, Salford College 1999.

SEEING RED

Smells like red

Smells like people

Tastes rubbery

Tastes like clothes

People shutting mouths

Shouting all the time

Stretching arms, pulling

Hands ripping shirts.

Waiting for gates

Sad gates, burning chairs

Pulled out of sockets.

Lifting cards, never

Shutting mouths, names

Burn your ground to God,

Smiling, rumbling and jumped up!

By Wesley Goodwin, Salford College 1999.

COLOURS OF MY HEART

Yellow makes me blue
Red and pink makes me in love

Sweetheart is in love
With someone really lovely
And beauty is something,
Someone will look after you,
Gives love. Likes you.

Love is something in my mind
That makes me feel inside
Love is somebody
Light and cold, Blue is cold, Sky is light.

By Joanne. Salford College, Craig Hall 1999.

SNOW COLOURS

I walk in the snow, breaking my ankle
My mother made me: touched.
I feel warm and loved.
I walk in the black snow.

By David Salford College. Craig Hall 1999

FLOWERS

Pink flowers are beauty and love
Yellow is happiness
Red hearts mean love and purple love is power
The sky makes me feel cold and warm at the same time

By Edna & Tony. Salford College, Craig Hall Day Centre. 1999

HEART GIFTS

It's not things that can be bought
That, are life's richest treasure
It's just the little heart gifts
That money cannot measure
Cheerful smile, a friendly word
A sympathetically and priceless little treasures
From the storehouse of our God...

By Ian Crimes, Salford College. Basic Skills 1999.

INCLUSION

Language, and the way we use and develop it, can change perceptions of the way in which we accept other individuals. By using various methods, it is possible to support individuals of all abilities to create feelings and emotions in written form. This is the essence of poetry – *poetry: to make with words (Greek) and poetry is the best words in the best order*. By doing this we are able to stimulate memory, change views, develop psychomotor and cognitive domains and assist in helping the individual see their own world in a new, ever changing and exciting way.

However, the model used here, to define the creative process, has been conducted within *discrete* settings. The Basic Skills environment could be seen as a progressively *inclusive* setting. For example, students are returning to education and are committed to further education and will eventually be integrated into mainstream settings. This is the ideal notion what we all have, but with hindsight, students rarely have the opportunity to progress further due to a number of significant barriers, such as social-economic restraints. The discrete setting is one of convenience and one, which is linked to many social taboos regarding, *keeping the unknown in a safe environment and what we can't see won't harm us*.

Nevertheless, by using terms such as, *discrete, mainstream and inclusion* highlights the distinction and refuses to enforce the completeness of the education system within schools and further education. For example, facilitating creative writing classes for individuals labeled with learning difficulties and/or disabilities disregards the involvement and contribution of individuals with mixed abilities. Group dynamics would alter considerably and benefit all, including teachers. Difference would be accepted and individuals would become valued. This is a rosy picture, of course, but resources are available and there are efforts being made to make considerable changes.

The change in some individuals has already occurred through creating new images. *The sky makes me feel cold and warm at the same time*, wrote one student, which came from a sense of ambivalence and insecurity. She had mixed feelings about how she is perceived by others and felt insecure about showing her feelings. Her poem was about flowers and she told me later that

she had pretended to be a flower on the edge of a flowerbed. This reinforced my interpretation of how she sees the world and in some cases conflict is the best vehicle to create the best creative writing.

Students began to use personification and metaphor without being taught the actual figurative terms and I didn't want to weigh too heavily with technical language; words and images alone would take the prominent role. Students began to develop their ideas from prompting the use of colours in different ways, usually in the form of natural things such as flowers. I enjoyed the poem, *The Poem*, by Neil Gallagher and the line, *bright green crowds of mad people*. This was written as Neil was preparing a trip to Ireland. He was excited and spoke the words with gusto, which were totally spontaneous. It was a journey in his mind, mixed with memories; memories of the sea; how he could smell the wind and the ocean, the fish and hear the band as he marched through the streets. These two examples show that students are not only capable of figurative language, but that they can communicate in ways once thought as incongruous. Communication has taken a new form and has supplied teachers with more information and insight into the thoughts and feelings of the individuals.

Information suggests an informed opinion of an individual, but in this sense information is related to the understanding of thoughts and feelings as in the case of David, who said that having a lie down would be the first step in making himself a cup of tea. Only when questioned was it made clear that he suffered from diabetes and in the interest of Health and Safety he was right to say that if he had taken medication he would need to lie down before handling machinery or electrical equipment especially anything like a kettle or hob. The information wouldn't have been forthcoming if the tutor hadn't listened patiently to the response. It was David's feelings that were brought into the fore, expressing to others how things are if one is diabetic. Although this distracts from the element of creativity in its truest sense, David was creative in his explanation. We had just finished a session on poetry and in particular personification. I asked the class to each choose an inanimate object, such as a desk and to try and imagine how that object was feeling. David said, "*an empty chair would feel like a ghost*". Someone mentioned a cup of tea as their chosen object – David took ownership and said that they could swap, his chair for a cup of tea!