R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 018 428 TE 000 385

CREATIVE WRITING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL.

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PUB DATE MAR 68

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.32 6P.

DESCRIPTORS- *COMPOSITION (LITERARY), *CREATIVE WRITING, *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, *SECONDARY EDUCATION, ACADEMIC STANDARDS, COLLEGE PREPARATION, ENGLISH, INDUCTIVE METHODS, LABORATORY TRAINING, LANGUAGE USAGE, LITERATURE APPRECIATION, POETRY, PROSE, STUDENT DEVELOPED MATERIALS, STUDENT WRITING MODELS,

A DESCRIPTION OF SPECIFIC PROCEDURES FOLLOWED IN TEACHING A HIGH SCHOOL "CREATIVE WRITING" COURSE IS NEEDED BECAUSE COURSES BEARING THAT NAME ARE VARIOUSLY CONCEIVED BY TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS AND VARIOUSLY INTERPRETED BY SUPPORTERS AND CRITICS. SUCH A COURSE SHOULD BE DESIGNED TO AVOID THE CRITICISM THAT CREATIVE WRITING FOSTERS "EASY-GOING IMPRESSIONISM ABOUT ALL WRITING" AND A RESISTANCE TO THE DISCIPLINE OF EXPOSITORY WRITING. THE AUTHOR'S CREATIVE WRITING COURSE FOR SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IS CONCEIVED AS A COLLEGE-PREPARATORY COURSE IN PRIMARILY EXPOSITORY WRITING. THE CLASS IS CONDUCTED AS A WORKSHOP IN WHICH EACH STUDENT JUDGES HIS OWN WRITING AGAINST THAT OF HIS PEERS AND OF PROFESSIONAL WRITERS. INSTRUCTION IS INDUCTIVE, CONSISTENTLY MOVING FROM THE STUDENT'S WRITING TO WRITING PRINCIPLES. AIMS OF THE COURSE ARE (1) TO FAMILIARIZE THE STUDENT WITH VARIOUS LEVELS OF WRITING, (2) TO STRENGTHEN HIS ABILITY TO USE STANDARD, ACADEMIC ENGLISH, (3) TO ENCOURAGE HIM THROUGH PRACTICE TO DEVELOP SOME EASE AND PROFICIENCY IN WRITING PROSE, AND (4) TO INVOLVE HIM IN THE WRITING PROCESS, INTERPRETING HIMSELF AND THE WORLD ABOUT HIM IN STORY, ESSAY, AND VERSE. THIS INVOLVEMENT SHARPENS THE STUDENT'S CONSCIOUSNESS OF LITERARY TECHNIQUES AND OFTEN HAS THE FURTHER EFFECT OF MAKING HIM A MORE APPRECIATIVE READER OF LITERATURE. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 57 (MARCH 1968), 356-59, 430.) (RD)

VOLUME 57 NUMBER 3

ENGLISH JOURNAL

MARCH 1968

Creative Writing in the Secondary School

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CREATIVE writing, as it applies to a school program, a course of study, covers a wide range of practice in American secondary education. There is the "anything goes" class, with little restriction in either subject or writing. Another class lets the student choose his subject freely but holds him to academic standards of writing. Creative writing may be a special-interest course for students gifted with imagination and the ability and desire to write, selective in its enrollment and exacting in its demands. Or it may be a "dumping ground" for students unable to meet the requirements of regular college preparatory English. It may also be a therapeutic course where, under the guidance of a specially-trained teacher, students with sick personalities, antisocial tendencies, or emotional stresses write out their imbalance through creative expression and attain some curative value in the process. In limitation of forms a creative writing course may assign only stories and plays and verses, or it may include not only fiction and poetry but all forms of short writing—formal and informal essays and articles, autobiographical sketches, descriptive pieces, and even library papers.

Thus when a critic or detractor of creative writing in the schools talks with a supporter or enthusiast, the two may be some distance apart in just what they mean by creative writing. There is need for a definition of terms and a description of specific procedures.

In every school year since 1937 I have taught Creative Writing—and since the mid-forties in every semester. Enrolled in these classes have been tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade students, predominantly juniors and seniors, the vast majority college bound. I have always taught Creative Writing as college preparatory or as groundwork for college preparation—but never as terminal for college writing. A course of primarily expository writing, with emphasis on thought analysis and development in well-knit and closely related paragraphs that have order and proportion when they are put together, is I think necessary for every student anticipating college. It has been my experience that Creative Writing offers a sound approach to such a course and benefits the student entering it.

There is expert opinion to the contrary. A former member of the faculty of

the Harvard Graduate School of Education dissents: "There is little value, for the able college-bound student, in 'creative' writing," Professor Edwin H. Sauer writes.[1] "In fact, there can be a great deal of harm, if he learns an easygoing impressionism about all writing and thus aggressively resists the disciplines of exposition and persuasion." In his experience as temporary director of the freshman writing program at Harvard, Sauer found that "the recalcitrant student having trouble as a freshman and almost certain to have increasing difficulties as he advances, was the one usually whose secondary concentration on 'creative' writing made it impossible for him to accept analysis and evaluation of his attempts to organize thought into prose. Quite bluntly he had been overpraised for his 'realistic' attempts in the short story and his majestic exercises in free verse. Creative writing courses," Sauer concludes, "are *not* the proper fare for gifted students on any level above the junior high school."

I would not quarrel with Sauer's words were I to accept his "if" and its intimations—"if he learns an easy-going impressionism about all writing," or if he cannot "accept analysis and evaluation of his attempts to organize thought into prose," or if he is "overpraised for his 'realistic' attempts in the short story," or if he "aggressively resists" other kinds of writing. The implication in Sauer's disapproval is that creative writing is not disciplined writing, and that it is taught as a substitute for the essential training in exposition and persuasion that freshman courses in college composition require. Sauer has effectively shown, not that there should not be a creative writing course in the secondary school but what a creative writing course in the secondary school should not be.

ALL writing should be taught as a discipline. Writing is one of the great disciplines. Certainly the John Updikes would agree no less than the Gilbert Highets. It is a disservice to the student, to his language, and to the culture he represents to let him write what he will with no directing or restraining hand on how he writes. The argument that by concern with mechanics, grammar, usage, sentence structure, and rhetoric the "wells of inspiration" are dried up and the flow of imagination dammed is a confession of failure in techniques and motivation. If a teacher cannot establish a classroom climate wherein the tools of writing are respected in the development of their use, he has demonstrated his inadequacy as a teacher of composition, whatever form the composition takes, and should not teach composition. The better the student is, the more gifted, the greater the insistence should be on his ability to handle acceptable, standard, and academic English.

This is not to say that effective writing is not sometimes incorrect writing. Even the unexceptional high school student is not beyond observing that what his text and his handbook advise, and what his teacher requires in his own writing, often do not coincide with what he reads in books or magazines on the recommended school list. Has there ever been a teacher of composition who has not had to answer a challenge like this: "If Hemingway can do it, why can't I?" In this common experience there has been much double talk and evading the issue, to lower the standing of schoolbook English in the eyes of the intelligent student. He writes as the teacher directs him to write, but there is likely to be little carry-over beyond the classroom.

One means to close the gap between school English and general English is a study of levels of usage. And the best place I know to teach levels of usage is in a creative writing class. In any assignment there will be a range of usage levels

[1] Edwin N. Sauer. "Programs for the Academically Talented in English: What Are the Gains?" *English Journal*, 49 (January 1960) 14.

—academic, standard, informal standard, colloquial, nonstandard or vulgate—and the student learns to distinguish these levels by their practice, both in his and his classmates' writing. The same week's compositions might include a story from a summer's work in a tourist resort, with its possibilities for racial, social, and economic tensions; a story of conflict in a family between parents and children, or brothers and sisters, the conflict arising from temperamental, educational, or age differences; and a schoolground or classroom story, with its endless athletic, scholarship, and social rivalries or student-teacher polarities. A cross-section of language levels would be represented. It is the teacher's role to point out the variations and their effective or ineffective use, the writer's intention always in mind, and to relate them to the academic standards the handbooks or textbooks set forth. He cannot forego that responsibility, particularly for those students who are going on to college, whose every composition, on whatever level, can be an advancement in proficiency of writing. The student can be brought along to recognize the levels, and to measure divergencies against the academic standards his instruction manuals provide by some device, sign, asterisk, star, or whatever, and thus learn to choose his language according to his purpose and his reader. He does not have to be praised as a budding Faulkner when he accomplishes this; rather he should be held to higher and higher standards of grading, consistent with good writing and the achievement of his peers.

The levels-of-usage approach has been made easier by the contemporary ferment in language study, and by the onslaughts the descriptive and the structural linguists have launched against traditional grammar. Today's students are more at home in language shifts and controversy, and are not subjected to there's-only-one-correct-use that marked most of their teachers' training. This change in strategy in the teaching of composition the creative writing class exploits to the students' advantage.

THERE should be, of course, continuity in a school program of composition and good correlation between, for instance, eleventh-grade Creative Writing and twelfth-grade college preparatory English. With continuity and correlation, and good teaching (it may well be the same teacher), the results for student writing beyond high school can reverse those Sauer noted in the freshman writing program at Harvard. The student whose writing has trained him to recognize that levels of expression vary according to purpose and reader should not find difficult the adjustment between effective writing that is not handbook English and effective writing that is. And it can only add to the student's range of language to do the expansive and imaginative writing that narrative demands as well as the analytical, closely reasoned prose that exposition and argument demand. The student develops this range in the best way it can be developed, inductively, by the actual experience of writing.

Not only may Creative Writing serve the student in control of writing levels and range of writing skills. It may also, more importantly perhaps, involve him in the writing process itself. He learns to like to write. He is encouraged to write out of his own experience and observation. He may have moved from a favored to a less-favored district, from a private to a public school, from country to city or the obverse of these, and the effects of the changes on his view of himself and his society he presents in a short story or a character sketch. Or he may have observed what these shifts in circumstances do to other of his family, friends, or classmates. His presentation, whether all fact, all fiction, or a combination will measure his inventiveness and his insight into values. He is

interpreting his own life and environment. The gain is subjective. Writing becomes meaningful to him. But not permissive. Restraints there must be, models he must have.

The models are important. They should include those of his classmates and of adolescents beyond his classroom. They should include, of course, professional models. One might turn, for instance, to Hemingway—to "Big Two-Hearted River" for narrative prose, to "The Killers" for dialogue. There is no lack of professional models, the choice dependent on the kind of prose the teacher wants his students to strive for. Every writing discipline may parade its own. But the important models for the student are those of his peers, whose excellences are not beyond his reach, and particularly those of his classmates, whose successes he can compete with immediately.

The sources are many. The May *Literary Cavalcade*, year after year, presents a wealth of prize-winning adolescent writing in all the short literary forms, and provides both stimulus and example. There are anthologies that include professional and student writing. One that I have used is Barbara Pannwitt's *The Art of Short Fiction* (Ginn, 1964). A class can build its own anthology, the most effective source of all, and if there's continuity in the course and the teaching, the growing "book" can become an invaluable aid. In addition, the class may edit the school's literary magazine and so preserve its best writing and gain a wider reading public.

These immediate student models are especially important. They help the student maintain his perspective. The teacher must exercise caution that his charges do not see themselves as future Faulkners or Hemingways. He must remind himself often, and maybe his students, that he is teaching a high school course in composition—the number is legion—and the chance that any of his young writers will become career authors is remote. But they can become better writers, and better students, and they can become more understanding of themselves and the world they live in. One check for helping students maintain proper perspective is to present their writing to the class anonymously, so that an objective air prevails for discussion and criticism.

It is a workshop classroom, informal in tone but vital in the needs and interests of its students. The atmosphere lends itself to the effective teaching of skills and values. The climate for achievement is good. These boons may well extend into other English classes, into other areas of school work, into the whole educational program. One seldom loses the joy of learning once he becomes involved in its process.

An additional advantage—the creative writer becomes a better reader. In his attempt to portray character, keep the unities of time and place and action, provide motivation, build suspense, and maintain viewpoint, he learns to recognize these techniques and be more conscious of their excellences and defects in the literature he reads. He knows about pace and tone and mood—he has tried for them in his own writing. And the niceties of word use are less likely to be lost on him—he has himself wrestled with words to find the exact ones for his purpose. Sharpness of detail and beauty of expression he can appreciate better. These are all gains that together add up to a deeper, richer experience with books.

In summary, creative writing takes many forms in American secondary schools. The course outlined here is integral to a college preparatory program but not its terminus. It is not necessarily for all students who intend to go to college but preferably for those who like to write and have some ability for writing. Its aim is, objectively, to familiarize the student with the various levels of writing against the measuring stick of academic

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English, and to have him write enough prose to develop some ease and proficiency in its use. In short, it is free in what the student writes but disciplined in how he writes. Its aim is, subjectively, to involve the student in the writing process by his interpreting himself and the world about him in story, essay, and verse. In strategy the class is a workshop where the students can judge their own writing against each other's and against prime adolescent and good professional models. The teaching is inductive, always working from a student's writing to the principles of writing. Additionally and importantly, the student may sharpen his consciousness of literary techniques, and excellences by working in them, and thus become a more appreciative reader of literature.