Underlying Features and Principles of Creative Writing for Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Creative writing, across the globe, is a highly talked about issue with academia, academicians and learners having mutual consensus as to its scope and significance. However, analysis of the local teaching learning scenario reveals numerous issues and complexities resulting because of the absence of complete awareness about the concept, its principles, and features. The article attempts to clarify some foundation principles related with the concept of Creative Writing in ELT and EAP. The justification for the discussion came from real classroom situations; and the practical implications of the theoretical framework were provided by the data collected through an experimental study; also relevant research evidence is included to support the conclusions drawn. It raises the problems confronted during the teaching, learning and assessment of creativity; and addresses key pedagogical questions, like when to teach creative writing and what approach to be adopted; and arguments, like developing criteria for creative writing restricts creativity. Identification of the four basic components of creative writing as the starting frame of reference is the central focus of this discussion

Introduction

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The term creative writing conjures up two common concepts which were propounded, and firmly adhered to, by two schools of thought. The first one views it as a phenomenon that generates poetry and fiction and sometimes drama too. As opposed to this the other school considers creative writing to be highly imaginative; and any novel idea in terms of form, event, structure, characters, organization etc. is included in this genre. Coinciding with these basic beliefs are then several arguments, myths and controversies that have eventually lead to a very obscure and blemished understanding of the concept. Owing to this distorted perception, creative writing has lost its true essence and beneficial impact for learners and teachers.

Creative writing is simply understood as a kind of writing that uses language in imaginative and bold ways (Rozakis 1997). This definition was interpreted by the first school of thought in identification of poetry, novels and short stories to be the representative samples of creative writing as they dealt with imaginative and bold language ideas. This viewpoint confined creative writing to the literature based contexts only and the pursuit of the individuals possessing literary traits. Also this was an understatement that the utility and scope of creative writing was extremely limited as common people and more real world settings found no explicit purpose and benefit of spending time in this activity. Opposed to this, a different perspective emerged that viewed creative writing to be a part of real world (academic and professional) writings as the bold and imaginative use of language was found in various writings in this domain, like students' and newspaper articles and essays, biographies of people and so on. Hence, creative writing was found to be the essence of not just the literary individuals' writings, but of students in the academic settings and professionals in the real world setting. This school of thought advocated expanding the focus of creative

writing since it can be put to numerous uses and can result in innumerable benefits, both personal and professional. Eventually this newer insight into creative writing lead to the identification of its two main categories: Fiction and nonfiction. This means that there's something for everyone to read -- and to write. (Rozakis 1997), and creative writing is not an occupation or pursuit of a limited few only.

Fiction is creative writing that tells about made up events and characters, of which novels, poetry, short stories are the examples. If fiction contains imaginary situations and characters that are very similar to real life, then it becomes realistic fiction (Rozakis 1997). This is the category of creative writing which is also considered by many, as something, which is not a reality, is unusual or different; something that is an individual's personal thoughts or may be the wildest dreams; and which is the occupation of the literary people and a feature common to literature based contexts only. Indeed, creative writing is an extreme form of interpretive writing, which is on the opposite end of the continuum to where descriptive and other writing forms exist. Writers on this end of the continuum, where creative writing lies, attempt to construct or impose their own selected frameworks or schema on the events in reality in contrast to writers on the other end of the continuum whose objective is to reproduce and convey the form and meaning of some event in reality (Mosenthal & Jin 1981). This interpretation where it has established the first form of creative writing by indicating that writers here attempt to construct or impose their own frameworks, it also makes the case for the second form of creative writing called Nonfiction, which is about real people and events. Essays, biographies, autobiographies, and articles are all examples of nonfiction (Rozakis 1997). This coined the idea that creative writing is not completely

divorced from reality, but the events in reality only take on forms and meanings that are unique to the persons experiencing them. It is nonfiction form of creative writing that has saved the greater portion of the world's population that belongs to science and technology, trade and commerce from being deprived of the benefits and utility of creative writing. It is this nonfiction creative writing that was referred to when we heard the terms like: real world and academic based creative writing; it is this form of creative writing which has expanded the scope of creative writing, increased its popularity and revealed its unlimited benefits.

Once the research had established the significance and scope of creative writing, the learners and the learned were seen enthusiastically pursuing the teaching – learning process. Consequently several issues and scenarios emerged when individuals and institutions took up creative writing pedagogy. This article confronts the problems of teaching learning of creative writing in the local contexts, and develops insight into the underlying principles of the concept with an aim to allow learners and teachers to rightly align their focus of efforts, in order to achieve their objectives and maximum benefits.

Creative writing, in our local context, usually finds no place on institutional curriculum, and wherever it is undertaken it is rather a haphazard activity owing to a lack of awareness about the essential principles underlying the concept. A typical creative writing classroom is a session where students are asked to write on a topic beginning with the phrase "If I were…", or imagine the unreal and sometimes the unimaginable and end up with a creative writing product without any assistance from the teacher while the students write. The same practice is found right through elementary to high School and sometimes even beyond. These practices, then, rarely result in

developing any creative writing skills in learners; and eventually the teachers and learners only end up in losing interest in writing, in general, and creative writing, in particular.

In order to understand the nature of teaching- learning of creative writing, before addressing the question "how to teach creative writing", one must confidently answer the question "when ?" Creative writing abilities can only be developed once the basic writing skills are cultivated which give the acceptable structure to all creative writing specimens. Learners must learn 'how to write' before learning 'how to write creatively.' Evelyn Rothstein and Gerald Lauber (2000) argued this case in these words, "imagine students who have been taught to write systematically and developmentally from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Each year, they have created their own personal thesaurus, written biographical and autobiographical sketches, responded in organized written statements to their ideas and opinions in personal, persuasive and explanatory essays and articles. Furthermore as they created all of this writing, they understood and applied the appropriate conventions of writing grammar and spelling. This utopian dream can be achieved… because the ability to write goes hand in hand with the ability to use language precisely, creatively, and effectively". Thus the most significant question in the teaching – learning of creative writing is to ask: "whether the students have developed sufficient writing skills that are essential to take up creative writing?" The students will never be able to exhibit creativity if they have deficient basic writing skills. If this basic feature of teaching and learning of creative writing is not met then the creative writing samples may characterize by novel and beautiful ideas and the impression of one's personality [to some extent], but it will remain

directed towards ones' self only and finding acceptability with audience and forums may prove impossible.

Emphasizing the product and ignoring the process that results in this product is an undesirable practice that is usually found in creative writing scenarios too, just like in all other contexts of English writing. Usually teachers are seen to provide little instruction while students engage in creative writing situations; but whenever instructions are provided, they tend to focus all attention on the product indicating the features expected to be present. Sometimes even a sample is provided and the students then end up imitating it. According to Kelen " The I know and you don't, so listen up style of teaching has its pseudo- theoretical base, in an easy prescriptivism" which contradicts what we now know about language and how it is learnt . Using product or process approach, each has its own benefits. The former emphasizes the writing process and the latter concentrates on the product of writing, as suggested by the terms. But by combining the two approaches for teaching creative writing, maximum benefits can be drawn and one can ensure that learners are guided through successive and possibly recursive steps of an objective and systematic description of composing (Nystrand, 1989 p.67) prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and publishing (process focus) to achieve (product focus) the text's purpose, element of style, form, clarity and precision in meaning (Connor 1987, Kaplan & Shaw 1983). This approach allows students and teachers to overcome shortcomings of both the product and the process approaches as well as other practices of creative writing and EAP situations like: teachers' prescriptive ness to good texts, students writing and teacher's correcting, writing failing to find any audience and remaining self directed, and having no relevance and scope in EAP contexts.

After addressing the foremost issue of when to teach creative writing and using what approach, the next important concern of creative writing is taken up, which is also the central focus of this paper, as outlined by the next research observation. Creative writing texts of students were given to four different teachers for assessment. The same texts were assessed differently by the panel of teachers who were given no guidelines for marking. The results of the assessment showed significant variation amongst the scores and the decision regarding which text was considered as good. The discussions with the teachers revealed that all of them assessed creative writing samples using different standards: novelty of thought, acceptable English writing rules, a unique use of language structure (word, phrase or sentence), productivity etc. Each teacher also differed in assigning priority to the standards, for some creativity of thought was more important no matter how wild, for others still for any creativity to be really meaningful acceptable English rules became the pre requisite

This observation was similar to many earlier identified instances and situations where academicians and researchers felt the need for developing standards that would help the teachers and learners to identify the characteristics of creative writing for teaching, learning and assessment. The measurement of aesthetic qualities of students' written discourse (e.g. Essays, compositions, term papers, poems) has received little attention by educators and researchers. In the absence of objective characteristics, we are posed with problems just mentioned. Identification of objective characteristics of creative writing might enable classroom teachers to assess reliably the quality of student's written performance. This implied that the development of objective measurement procedures or standards might increase the sensitivity of teachers to students' hidden or overlooked

creative talents. Attempts in identification of measurable objectives lead researchers to develop the philosophy regarding various dimensions of creativity, and they concluded with the idea that creative ideas behaviour can be reduced to a number of measurable dimensions or components, as opposed to the humanistic and phenomenological views that componential analysis violates the nature of creativity (Guilford 1962, Malgady & Barcher 1977). Furthermore, research in creative writing revealed that the dimensions that were representing creativity correlated significantly with teachers' judgment of creativity, globally (Malgady and Barcher 1979), a fact similar to what earlier investigations in English Language learning had observed that language learning processes around the world follow a universal pattern (Brown 1973, Littlewood 1991).

The description of creativity in terms of components does not inhibit creativity but it provides the teachers and learners as the starting framework to correctly align their methods and procedures. The individuals, who consider these components as restrictions and limiting factors, need to view that such a frame of reference is extremely important for teaching, learning and assessment; and to be vigilant against such undesired scenarios and practices as mentioned earlier in the paper.

The researches and investigations in identification of components revealed that "number and novelty of ideas characterize creative thinking; i.e., creative individuals generally tend to be highly productive and original in their work. Other characteristics presumed to reflect creativity are flexibility (or lexical diversity) and elaboration of ideas (Guilford 1962). Thus, analyzing all identified dimensions of creative writing as evident from researches, creative writing skills can be measured in terms of four components: Novelty, Fluency, Flexibility and Accuracy. Each of these

components establishes one essential characteristic of creative writing. Novelty deals with creativity i.e. uniqueness of ideas, fluency means number of alternate ideas, which is productivity simply, flexibility introduces the concept of variety in ideas, and acceptability of creative writing by ensuring it to be in accordance with the rules of English grammar and syntax is the dimension that accuracy governs.

Conclusion

Creative writing is not an activity confined to the literary contexts and aesthetes only, with having hardly any real world significance and use which may motivate anyone to take up its learning or teaching. But, it has a broad scope which allows people with diverse needs and from diverse fields to use this generic writing for achieving personal and professional rewards. From poetry and short stories to articles and biographies, a whole range of creative writing forms can be taken up by individuals interested in drawing benefits from this medium. Hence fiction and nonfiction are two categories of creative writing which have extended the scope of creative writing, enabling writers to either come up with their own interpretations of events in reality or beyond.

For teaching and learning of Creative writing to be of any meaning and consequence, the basic underlying principles and features must be considered. The first principle states, creative writing skills can be developed only if the basic writing skills have been attained. The second principle of creative writing indicates, the most desirable and fruitful practice in creative writing pedagogy is to focus not just the product, but an equal attention must be paid to the process, which will automatically ensure better end products.

The four measurable objective features of creative writing are Novelty, Fluency, Flexibility and Accuracy. The teaching and learning of creative writing must target these four dimensions that characterize creative writing standards or its frame of reference. These conclusions can make creative writing contexts more productive, the teaching, learning, assessment and all other aspects can be made more authentic and effective.

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