



Back to Basics

Article Author:

[Robert Hull](#) [1]

[159](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Robert Hull on approaches that enable children's writing.

How can teachers reclaim creativity in the classroom? In this, his second article on interventionism in the classroom, **Robert Hull** argues the case for an approach that enables children's writing capacities to spring from a gathering of motivation?. <!--break-->

Creative teaching

Many would argue that, *pace* **Waiting for a Jamie Oliver** and other pessimisms like my own, there is a great deal of creativity abroad in English teaching, that the notion of its needing restoring is patronising, deeply offensive to the many teachers who work creatively.

Others, extremely creative teachers among them, would say that English teaching has become, has been made, increasingly difficult. They would note that teachers are in many ways remarkably controlled and stifled; and point out that however creative some can nonetheless be under such conditions, they would be far more so, and more truly so, if they were professionally free. Some would instance as a crucial undermining of the creative, the loss of their most basic intellectual freedom the freedom to devise programmes of work according to their own professional knowledge and insights.

The tough realist would probably respond with: why such touchiness about control?; why the nostalgia for outmoded freedoms??

Because ultimately creativity depends on freedoms. Because the teacher's emotional and intellectual commitment to the poems and fictions that he or she freely seeks out for children rather than is led or sent to is the source of a creative energy which, made available to children, is transformative. Because the whole drawn-out demandingness of the process, from the initial choice of what to read, through the minute-by-minute business of deciding, with children, how to read and talk and write, is what makes such teaching risky, creative, and potent. This is not the sorted-out world of comfortably reading a prescribed number of pages weekly in the literacy slot, or seeing to it that children know what haiku and alliteration and so on mean.

Is it that teachers know what benefits to children would accrue from restorations of professional autonomy, without feeling able to press for them? After all, and ironically enough, teachers offer to writers-in-school freedoms they don't themselves possess. It's an intriguing question: why, next week, in poetry workshops, am I to be more free to do what I choose to than the teachers whose decisions will affect children's learning more deeply and continuously?

I'm free, for instance, to devise subversive work work that derives from my irreducible conviction that playing with register terms is mainly a waste of time, that we're not there to understand a writer's intentions or analyse effects, that we're not studying or appreciating but talking and enjoying. Why shouldn't teachers be similarly free? Moreover I shall, because I can, base my work not on Impeccable Approved Literacy Hour Practice (IALHP) but on the

rawly naïf belief that children can be induced to feel that writing a poem and reading a poem are natural and pleasurable activities. I worry though: why aren't teachers equally free to devise a practice that reflects their own beliefs and aims? Who doesn't trust them?

Dumping the anti-creative idea

Some of the obstacles in English teachers' paths are ideas: in particular, the idea, the premise basic to much documentation, that the study of language and analytic work with language, especially the teaching of grammar, are ultimately what will 'raise standards' of English.

The study of language is an indispensable part of English, but it is not through such study that children learn to write and read or come to enjoy writing and reading. They learn to write essentially by writing, as they learn to read by reading. The primary energy deployed in both activities is the hauling up of material from the depths of the creating imagination. Not just the writer but the reader too, Barthes reminded us, is a 'producer of text'.

This isn't a laissez-faire notion that neglects the role of the teacher. The true teacher of writing and reading is a literature fanatic, an imagination-arouser, a reader-aloud, an inspiritor, an enthusiast, and a tactful but purposeful critic of what children write. That teacher knows that writing emerges from reading, but not in the ways celebrated in 'Grammar for Writing'. Boys and girls reading Harry Potter non-stop or pony stories are likely to write Harry Potter-like stories or pony stories. The immersion of the imagination in a writer or a character or a genre is refracted in writing. It happens through conscious emulation, but not only through that. The 16-year-old reader of Conrad, say, who starts to write longer and more elaborately constructed sentences does so not because he or she has analysed and 'stored up' Conrad's 'techniques', but essentially by an unavoidable mimesis, osmosis at times even, both in terms of gathering complex meanings and of unconsciously drinking in the music of such prose, that comes directly out of reading that has been pleasurable.

Successful teachers know this from their own practice. They know that 'creative teaching' here means arranging for all these things somehow to happen. Their knowledge, though, is of little use to their pupils in the face of the coercive assumption that children's writing develops in consequence of continuous analysis and study, climaxing in occasional forays into writing.

Thinking afresh

Where does one look, then, for a genuinely creative pedagogy, a pedagogy to articulate English teachers' creative freedoms? Not, I've suggested, in the National Literacy Project. At the heart of the Literacy project 'readable in the stream of its documentation' is an intellectual vacuum, which appears not to be so only because of the febrile cerebration it sets in the place of an active wholehearted creativity.

Perhaps the first step is simply to agree to reopen the closing philosophical and pedagogic horizons of teaching, to put philosophy and pedagogy back in place as a central concern for teachers. It seems now as if years of dependency on the argot of Literacy Strategy and National Curriculum has produced the fragmentation of any possible language of teaching, a philosophical aimlessness and incoherence which is masked by the quasi-rational air of the state-speak teachers encounter there.

How often, at the moment, do teachers-in-training encounter the kind of writing that has inspired successfully creative pedagogies? Do they come across inspiring popularisers like John Holt, or Herbert Kohl? Do they meet Kenneth Koch's wonderful straightforward creative books about children writing? Are the delicate observations that Christian Schiller recorded during his long inspectorship available to them 'what he said about creativity, or children's 'personal time', for instance? Are Alec Clegg's or Herbert Read's historical roles in shifting schooling in more creative directions? Are Chukovsky, Douglas Barnes, James Britton, Harold Rosen, David Holbrook and others read for their profound insights about language? I can't answer my own questions; I'm not sure. I'm sure though that I don't hear such names mentioned or read of them except occasionally. And I know none is invoked in the documentation that represents current 'thinking'.

Getting out from under ?standards?

SATs is perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of a willingness to corral the creativity of teachers and children. Though SATs purports to test ?English?, it clearly tests too drastically limited a range of what can happen under ?English? to be accorded that description; any extrapolation from ?SATs? to ?English? is absurd. SATs tests how well children can do a SATs test, not how well they can perform the things that happen under ?English?.

The value ? to the state ? of SATs testing is that it produces ?results?. To ask each child to write a poem on a subject of his or her own choice would not, because the openness of the task would threaten the measurement and comparison that ?results? entail and proceed from. Though a million answers to the same test can be milled into ?results?, a million poems on a million subjects can?t. In other words, ?results? depend on standardisation, on the fact of a million children doing the same thing. ?Standards? is a euphemism for ?standardised performance?, not a synonym for ?quality?.

For quality, for the visible refraction of talent and capacity in pupils? English, we would need to look to an outcome arrived at differently, and in the opposite direction. That is, to stories, poems, plays and so on that spring from discussion, thought and preparation in the one classroom, and from a gathering of motivation there. In other words, unlike ?results?, ?quality? is idiosyncratic and situated; children?s talents as writers emerge clearly only where a task or test has a context of development, or is localised in previous work.

I recall some ?Chinese? poems and drawings that a class of 11-year-olds did over a three- or four-week period of immersion in Chinese poetry and paintings. Their work was gathered in a pamphlet-anthology of some 20 pages. What would have been gained, in terms of knowing about those children?s capacities, by reducing that richness of teaching and outcome to an hour-long decontextualised, out-of-the-blue demand to, say, produce a poem? Nothing. Rather, the revelation as to those children?s capacities that the work made available to me as teacher would have been lost.

And here is the *reductio ad absurdum* of SATs and standardised testing. It effaces what it purports to reveal. It sees ?results? and loses sight of actual capacity and actual performance ? of talent and quality, realised and realisable. ?Rising standards? here means ?increasing success with SATs?. And to the extent that schools drive towards SATs, SATs results are likely to improve. It is self-fulfilling: define ?English? in minimal terms; teach that minimal ersatz version, obsessively if you please, missing everything else out; test it. Lo, inevitably, standards of ?English? rise. An alternative interpretation of such ?rising standards?: that more and more children are spending time practising for SATs, improving at SATs, and missing out on English.

Talent at risk?

I?d argue that there is enough evidence of the thinning out of creativity in English to be worrying. It is readable in the experience of the writers of **Waiting for a Jamie Oliver** . It comes to one anecdotally in correspondence. It?s perceptible in lessons one sees, like the literacy-hour devoted to ?plurals?, in a room with no children?s writing on display and the books tucked mostly out of sight. An adviser recently said to me, speaking of the production of school anthologies of children?s writing, and showing me a county-wide anthology of writing last produced in 2002, that such things had ?pretty well dried up?.

Some years ago, Ted Hughes, celebrating another year of 50,000-plus entries to the Daily Mirror, later the W H Smith Children?s Literary Competition, could say, comparing the winners? collection with writing from other countries, that ?clearly, they are of exceedingly high quality?. He writes in almost awed terms of children?s ?phenomenally abundant writing talents?. He might well wonder what has happened to that fabulous inheritance.

Robert Hull , a school teacher for 30 years, is the author of two collections of poems for children ? **Stargrazer** (Hodder), shortlisted for the Signal prize in 1998, and **Everest and Chips** (OUP, 2002). He has written much history for children and a dozen or so collections of folk tales, and edited as many poetry anthologies. His **Behind the Poem** (Routledge, 1988) is a detailed study of children writing poems. His second collection of poetry from Peterloo Poets is due out in Spring 2007.



[Robert Hull TIFF.JPG](#) [3]



[Robert Hull TIFF.JPG](#) [4]

Page Number:

6

Source URL (retrieved on Dec '19): <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/159/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/back-to-basics>

Links:

[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/robert-hull>

[2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/159>

[3] [http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Robert Hull TIFF.JPG](http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Robert%20Hull%20TIFF.JPG)

[4] [http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Robert Hull TIFF_0.JPG](http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Robert%20Hull%20TIFF_0.JPG)