

Along the *Write Lines*: a case study exploring activities to enable creative writing in a secondary English classroom.

Abstract

This article arises from a four week study of a class of 14-15 year old students. The study explored students' perception of themselves as writers and the effects of a variety of teaching and learning strategies on their creative writing responses. The aim of the project was to enhance the students' creative writing, whilst ascertaining whether there were particular activities or types of writing that would lead to students perceiving more satisfactory outcomes in their writing. It answers the research question: What do I observe, and what do my students say, about the experience of different classroom based creative writing tasks?

Introduction

Sir Ken Robinson, in his depressing TED Talk of 2013, *How to escape Education's Death Valley*, expresses his view that human curiosity and our inherent creativity are 'contradicted by the culture of education under which most teachers have to labor and most students have to endure' (Robinson 2013: 2:54). Later, he hints at his frustration that the recommendations of the National Commission on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) report of 1999 were not followed up by the Labour Government who commissioned it, 'but then [Tony Blairⁱ] presided over a series of measures that ... were test driven, competitive and based on a very narrow view of educational priorities. He talked ... just about STEMⁱⁱ disciplines and about raising test scores' (Robinson 2014:161). It could be argued that the potential for creativity in state schools has become even more parlous now that Michael Goveⁱⁱⁱ has dealt a death blow to the creative arts through the introduction of the Progress 8 school performance

measurement which favours academic subjects, and thus it behoves class room teachers to embrace 'Creativity across the Curriculum' within their everyday practice.

Whilst agreeing with Robinson's view that creativity is 'an inherent part of the everyday human experience', Beghetto and Kaufman do not believe creativity can be killed ('creaticide') but suggest instead it is 'resilient' and more or less likely to be expressed depending on external conditions (Beghetto & Kaufman 2014: 53). They argue that the environment is a crucial factor in developing creativity in the classroom, and it is the environment which will determine 'in large part, whether creative potential will be supported (or suppressed)' (*ibid.*:54).

Creativity in context

There is a wide range of literature on creativity. Glăveanu (2010) builds on the work of Csikszentmihalyi, the creator of flow theory, which was first defined as 'a holistic sensation that people have when they act with total involvement' (Csikszentmihalyi 1975:36). Glăveanu emphasises the importance of the 'other', arguing that 'creativity always takes place in a community' (*ibid.*: 91). He describes three different paradigms of creativity; the He-paradigm which focuses on the solitary genius and is linked to divine inspiration and genetic inheritance, and refers only to the highest levels of creation that 'constitute land-marks in the history of a domain, sometimes even the history of humanity'; the I-paradigm within which creative acts were seen to be within the grasp of most individuals, with individual traits increasingly analysed and evaluated, and the We-paradigm, which examines creativity within the context that it occurs (*ibid.*: 81). It is the third paradigm with which this case study is concerned.

Cole, Sugioka and Yamagata-Lynch's qualitative study demonstrates that a creativity-supportive environment, known as a 'responsive classroom environment' is an important factor in inducing creative expression (Cole et al., 1999: 278). In their study they found that developing positive teacher-student relationships enabled risk-taking and creative behaviours in class. Furthermore, non-standard methods of assessment, which focus more on creative solutions rather than grades (which can be used 'as a prodding device'), are said to reduce stress and thereby divert students' attention from evaluation to creative expression (*ibid.*: 290). They also suggest that independence, freedom of choice and the emphasis on there being 'no right answer' creates an open environment which allows creativity to flow (*ibid.*: 287). The researchers found that using a variety of classroom activities such as a combination of divergent and convergent thinking, brainstorming, and group collaboration could also lead to a rise in creativity.

Case study research design

My project involved an English class of twenty-eight 14-15 year old students in a Year 10 class in a rural comprehensive school in England. All names have been changed to culturally appropriate names to ensure anonymity. The English class was the second highest achieving set out of nine, formed on the basis of students' combined assessment scores at the end of every half term during Year 9. I had previously taught 13 of the students in this class when they were in Years 7 and/or 9 and so already had the good working relationship with them that Cole et al. argue to be important in encouraging creative behaviours in the classroom. This relationship would enable students to give frank answers to my questions, and having experienced my teaching

methods in the past they were able to trust that the research project would not be detrimental to their learning. The rest of the class, whom I had not previously taught, were predisposed to follow the example of their peers in being open to ideas and honest discussion.

Creativity is defined by Beghetto and Kaufman as representing something that is not only 'new or different' but is also 'task appropriate or useful' (Beghetto & Kaufman 2014: 54). Creative writing would form an important component of IGCSE coursework at the end of Year 10 so whatever we did in lessons should help all students to achieve better grades in the long run, regardless of whether or not they formally participated in the research project.

Creating the *write* environment

I created a series of lessons that ran over four weeks which would result in students having completed three different types of creative writing: flash fiction, sonnets and a creative modification of a children's story. Flash fiction is a modern style of writing, also known as "short-short story", 'microfiction', 'nanofiction' and 'sudden fiction' (T. Williams in Earnshaw, S. 2014: 316). The flash fiction should enable complete freedom to write with minimal planning, the sonnet form would be the polar opposite in that it required tight adherence to the traditional structure, and the modification of the children's stories would enable students to write in a modern form, such as by creating twitter feeds, which are very familiar to them in their everyday lives.

The data was collected from writing completed in students' exercise books. After finishing each piece of work they wrote down answers to questions I posed to

encourage immediate reflection on the creative process. At the end of the series of lessons, students who volunteered were interviewed in small groups, and their answers recorded on my school laptop. The interviews consisted of open ended questions which invited 'an honest, personal comment' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011: 392), designed to encourage reflection on the whole series of lessons and enable me to triangulate what they had written with what I had observed in lessons.

As already stated by Cole et al., assessment can be counterproductive to the creative process so I made it clear to students that I would not be marking the writing but would be reading it for pleasure. My judgement of the success of the writing was intuitive, based on my own experiences as a teacher, reader and writer. Robinson states that assessing creativity is problematic, 'Conventional assessment tends to focus on products or outcomes... Assessing creative development in education has to take account of the value of the process, and of children's training and achievement through it as well as of the inherent qualities of the public products that result' (NACCCE 1999: 127) and as Beghetto and Kaufman demonstrate, when students experience an activity as more 'test-like' they are 'less likely to take the types of intellectual risks that are supportive of meaningful learning and creativity' (Beghetto & Kaufman 2014: 60).

The initial investigation was a 'Rivers of Writing' task directly inspired by Gabrielle Cliff Hodges' 'Rivers of Reading' research into habitual and committed readers. For her case study, Cliff Hodges had students create 'Rivers of Reading' collages of themselves as readers which 'encouraged them to reflect on their personal reading histories and bring the subject of reading to the forefront of their attention' (Cliff

Hodges 2010: 187). I was interested to find out whether my students viewed themselves as writers, and I wanted to use their visual representations to explore with them the times in their lives when they perceived they had written creatively. Further, I aimed to create an overtly 'creativity supportive learning environment' (Beghetto & Kaufman 2014: 64) prior to beginning the creative writing exercises. It is the 'Rivers of Writing' activity and the flash fiction that I focus on in this article.

'Rivers of Writing'

(Where I have quoted from student work I have left in any grammatical errors or spelling mistakes.)

Students were given two one hour lessons to create their visual representations, first planning in their exercise books before transferring their ideas onto A3 paper.

Although I had only provided plain white A3 paper and coloured pens, students were creative in their use of whatever scraps of coloured paper they could find in the classroom cupboard and some headed off to the art department to get the different colours they felt would make their representations more successful.

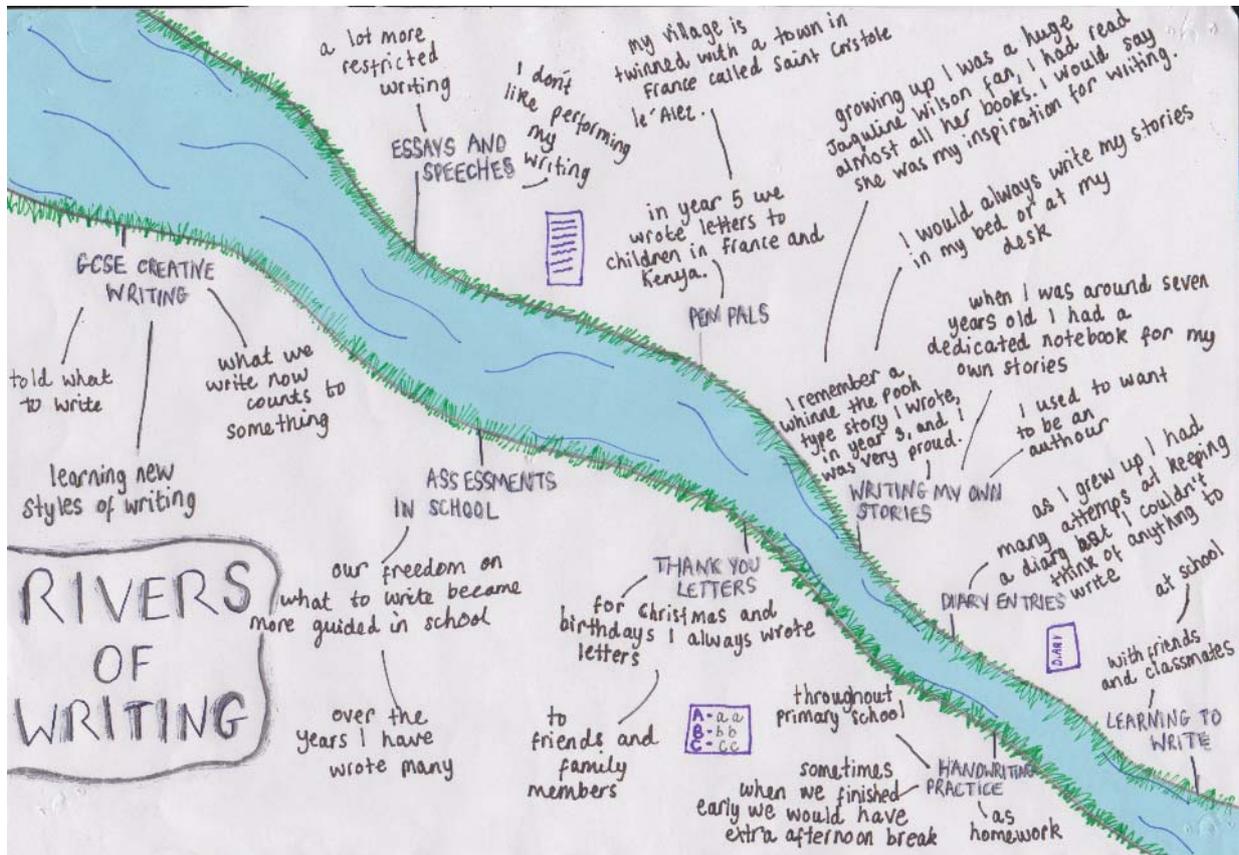
From my observation it seemed that they enjoyed the creativity the activity allowed, and it fulfilled Beghetto and Kaufmann's recommendations for establishing a creativity supportive environment by allowing 'some level of choice... requir[ing] students to come up with their own ways to solve problems and generat[ing] novel products ... and outcomes' (Beghetto & Kaufman 2014: 64). Also, it was markedly different from an 'ordinary' English lesson and thus engaging and enjoyable because of the novelty.

Students took a variety of approaches to the activity, and chose a variety of visual metaphors to express their writing journey, such as horses maturing, roads, flowers growing and a roller coaster. One of the main themes that became apparent from the artefacts is that many students feel that writing is no longer an enjoyable activity, as it had once been in primary school, because everything they now write has to be for a purpose.

Emily expresses this in her river, which starts small to reflect her young age and expands as she grows. Her initial writing experiences are situated as collaborative, where she learnt to write 'with friends and classmates', demonstrating Glăveanu's We-paradigm. Initially, it seems, she found individual writing difficult, as she states she 'couldn't think of anything to write' in her 'many attempts at keeping a diary' but later on, at around aged 7, she used to write her own stories and wanted to become an author, inspired by her reading of Jacqueline Wilson's books. It is clear that she had space and time to write at home, in her bed or 'at my desk', and also that she was supported in her writing as she 'had a dedicated notebook for my own stories' which must have been provided by an adult due to her young age. She had clearly experienced success at writing as she remembers being 'proud' of the story she wrote in Year 3. The importance of letter writing, to real people such as family members, friends and a pen pal features in her early writing experience. Writing thank you letters would have been encouraged by her parents and writing letters to pen pals supported by the school reinforces the importance of writing being a real world activity. However the letters give way to school assessments as 'our freedom on what to write became more guided in school'. Further up the 'river', writing becomes 'a lot more restricted' and students are 'told what to write', even for GCSE creative writing. She wrote in her exercise book that 'by making the visual image, I understood that my writing has

become less productive as I grew up'; a sad indictment of her English lessons and a situation that echoes Ken Robinson's sentiments.

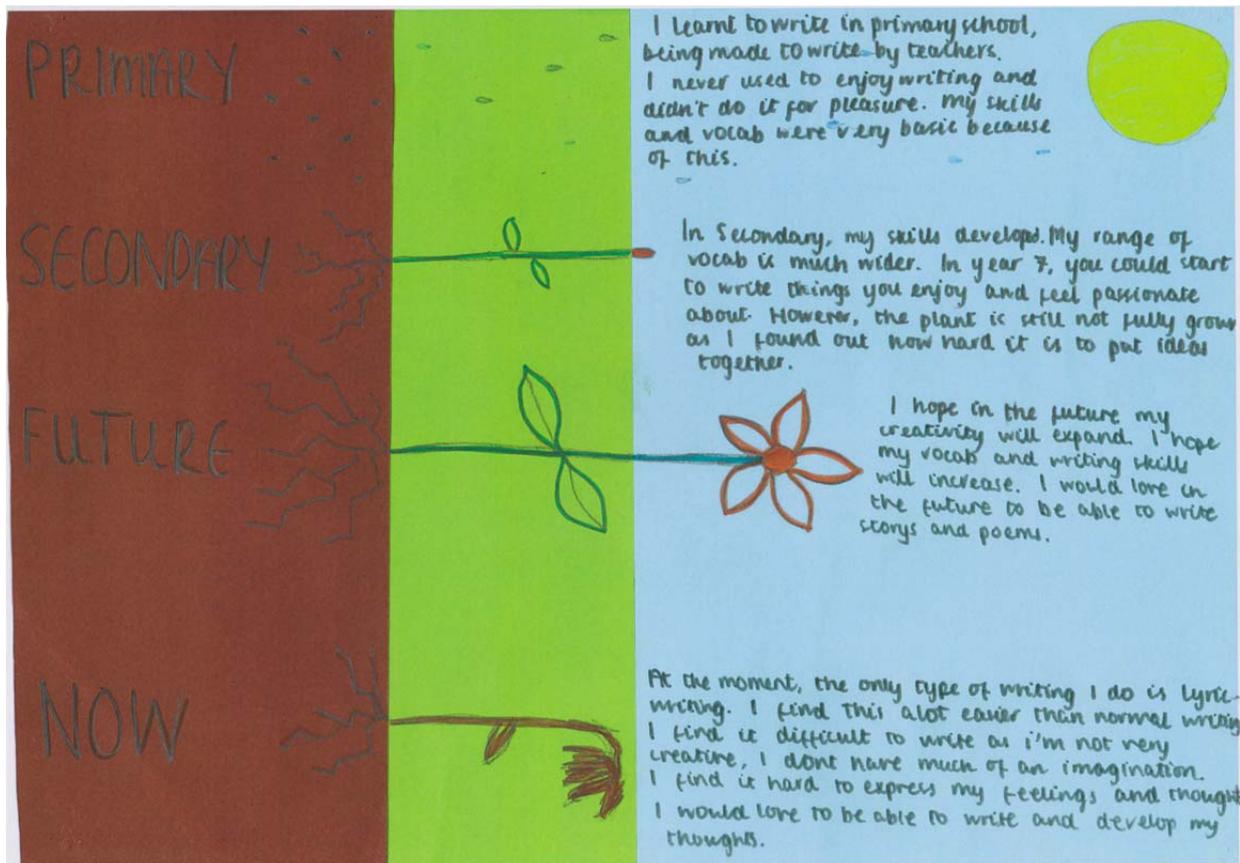
Figure 1: Emily's river



Laura's chosen image was that of flowers growing. She was highly creative in her use of coloured paper and thought of an original visual metaphor, yet in her artefact she describes herself as 'not very creative, I don't have much of an imagination.' The growing flowers express hope for the future, but her current position is represented by a withered flower which seems to be a visual representation of her disappointment and lack of inspiration. Laura's main block to her writing appears to be a perceived lack of 'vocab', which she mentions several times on her image. She states she was 'made to write' in primary school and 'never used to enjoy [it]'. Her experience of learning to write does not appear to have been pleasurable, and is in contrast to the impression

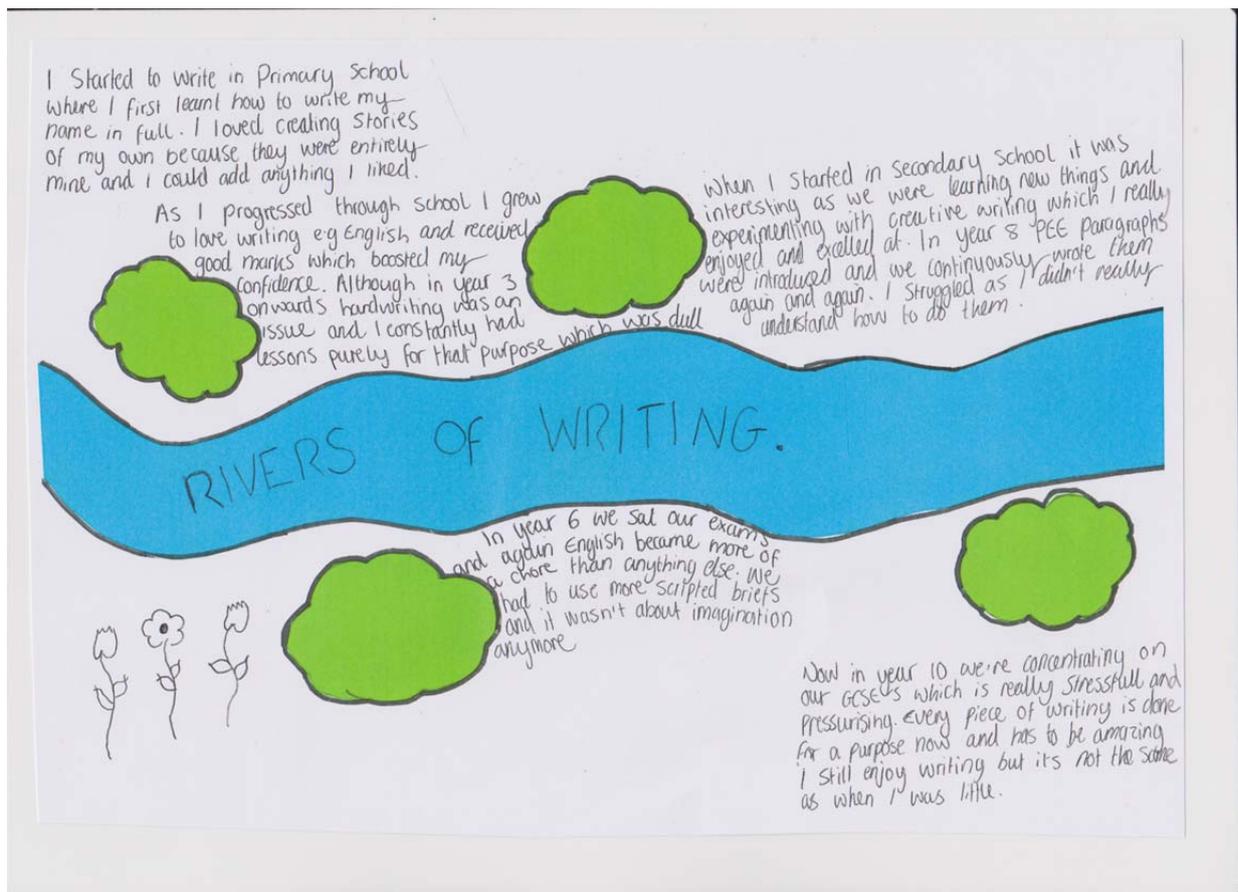
Emily gives of learning with her friends and being rewarded with an extra break when they finished handwriting practice early. I learnt from this that Laura lacks confidence in her abilities to write, despite being labelled an 'able' student. There is no mention of her writing anything outside of school until her lyric writing of the present moment, although she says she finds it 'hard to express my feelings and thoughts'. She wrote in her exercise book that the physical making of the picture made her realise how much her skills and herself as a writer have developed, but she has never thought of herself as a writer because 'I have never wrote anything for pleasure in my spare time. The only time I do is when I have to, for example at school or homework.' It seems that she does not count lyric writing as writing proper, and that despite the obvious evidence of her creativity she does not view her lyrics as creative writing. However, she has not given up and there is an implicit commitment to writing in the future which is depicted as a blooming flower with deep roots and the word 'hope' repeated in the writing above it.

Figure 2: Laura's flowers



Rozzie describes how she loved writing stories in primary school as she had the freedom to write what she liked. Good marks were given which 'boosted [her] confidence,' although handwriting lessons were 'dull'. Similar to Emily, it seems that her early experiences of learning to write were positive, however in Year 6 English became a 'chore' because the impending exams brought with them 'more scripted briefs and it wasn't about imagination anymore'; more evidence of 'Education's Death Valley'. In secondary school she enjoyed learning new things but the continuous writing of P.E.E.^{iv} paragraphs made her she struggle as she never really understood them. She states that she finds GCSE work in year 10 'stressfull and pressurising every piece of writing is done for a purpose now'. Although she still enjoys writing, 'its not the same as when I was little'.

Figure 3: Rozzie's river

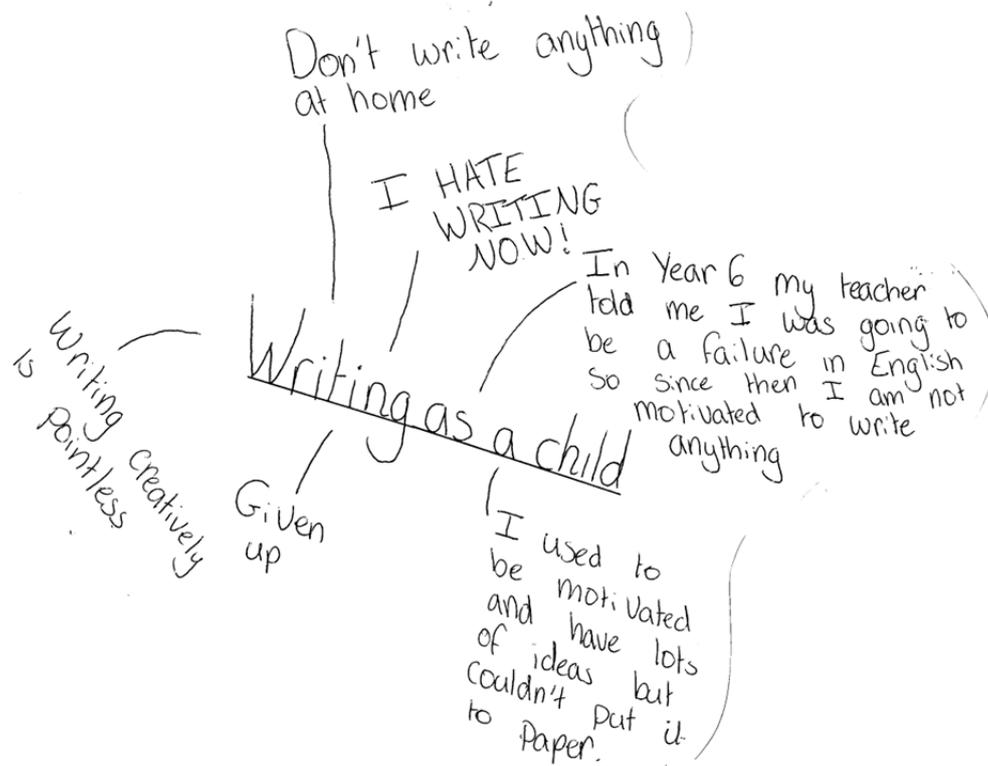


Amir was resistant to creating a 'river' and stated that he was 'not a writer' and 'hated writing'. I had observed in previous classes that his verbal responses were very good, particularly with regard to insightful comments made during poetry analysis, and he was often one of the first in class to make links between written language and complex ideas. However, his written responses were often very brief and I had made the thoughtless and sexist assumption he was being a 'typical boy'. I directed him to mind map all his past and present writing activities into his exercise book so that he might have a clearer picture of the times when he had been a writer. Having completed that activity Amir was able to tell me that when he was in Year 6 his teacher had told him that he was 'a failure in English and would never be any good at it'. After that he 'lost

confidence and gave up trying in English'. His visual response, a very simple mind map, illustrates this point very succinctly. 'I HATE WRITING NOW!' is emphasised by his use of capitals and an exclamation mark, as if he is shouting, and is perhaps an expression of his anger at being treated so unfairly.

Cole et al. make the link between environments that encourage independence and risk taking, and intrinsic motivation (Cole et al., 199: 278). Amir's motivation had been destroyed by his Year 6 teacher's disparaging comments. He writes that he 'used to be motivated and have lots of ideas [but now] I am not motivated to write anything.' His difficulty with putting his ideas down on paper appears to have been the catalyst for his teacher's outburst and Amir's response has been to give up trying; his creative potential suppressed by external conditions (Beghetto & Kaufman 2014:53). Amir's image demonstrates that he doesn't write anything at home and he views 'writing creatively [as] pointless'. Unlike Laura, he expresses no hope for the future and is very much focussed on the impact of his past experience. For the first time I made the link between students' experiences of learning to write at primary school and the effect these experiences have on their confidence in later years. Whilst Emily and Rozzie had experienced early success and positive feedback with their creative writing, having learnt to write in a creativity supporting environment (Beghetto & Kaufman 2014 and Cole et al.2010), and are confident with their writing abilities now, it seems that Laura had not experienced the same sense of achievement, and Amir had been positively discouraged. It can therefore be inferred that the two latter students now suffer from lack of confidence in their creative writing abilities as a direct result of their early writing experiences.

Figure 4: Amir's mind map



With Amir's permission, I brought up our conversation with his parents at parents' evening the following week and his mother told me that she had recently been looking through his old Year 6 book and couldn't find a single encouraging comment, which corroborated Amir's memory of a negative relationship with his teacher. This was an extremely useful insight into Amir's classroom behaviour for me and has resulted in my being positively encouraging towards him in an attempt to rebuild his confidence, rather than nagging him and appearing disappointed at his apparent lack of effort as I had been wont to do previously.

The multi-modal activity of making the artefacts allowed students to express themselves creatively in a way that is different to our usual English lessons. Students shared their representations with each other as they worked in a sociable, relaxed

manner, and discussed their memories of writing experiences in primary school and KS3, triggering further details to be added to the artefacts. Talking about ideas thus emerged early on as a necessary part of the creative process, and echoes Glăveanu's insistence on the importance of social interaction in creative endeavours.

Maria, a high achieving girl who in the past has told me how much pressure her parents put her under to do well in her studies, said that she felt so much better after the activity as she had been able to relax and be creative having been feeling especially stressed that day. Her chosen metaphor, that of horses growing, is particularly important to her as an accomplished horsewoman. Further semiotic analysis of the artefacts revealed that some students had chosen metaphors that not only revealed their attitudes and experiences of writing, but also to their wider identity.

David, who had grown up in Japan, had drawn a beautiful illustration of Mount Fuji in the ukiyo-e style, and through our resulting conversation about living in Japan he was able to express to me some of the difficulties he has with writing correctly structured sentences in English.

Holly said that even though she felt her river was 'boring and plain', doing the activity 'made me feel creative.' The highpoint of her river was when she taught her little sister, who is disabled, to write her name. The 'Rivers of Writing' activity was therefore valuable not only for what it revealed about students' attitudes to writing, but also because it enabled conversations with students that I would not normally have had and thus gave me a deeper insight into their lives and distinct difficulties with English. Several students told me they hadn't realised how much they used to write, and that they used to enjoy it, but they didn't identify themselves as writers because to be a writer you have to be paid to do it. It also occurred to me from conversations and by

studying the 'rivers' that writing for pleasure for the majority of the class seemed to stop by Year 8 and I wondered what had happened to cause this; perhaps the dreaded P.E.E. had had negative effects on students' writing that their teachers were unaware of. McCallum describes the P.E.E. format as a 'hollow frame' which places '[frustrating] restrictions on response'. It 'denies other forms of response and only allows for exploration of particular elements of a text' (McCallum 2012: 116). The fact that Rozzie, a bright and creative girl, said she had never understood them, suggests that the restrictions made no sense to her as she had much more to write than the P.E.E. format allowed for.

At the end of the series of lessons I put the artefacts up on the display boards around the class room as a celebration of students' creativity. Other classes timetabled in the room were interested in them which resulted in those students having informal discussions about their own experiences of writing and their attitudes towards it.

In the lesson after completing the 'Rivers of Writing' activity, students wrote down answers to my questions in their exercise book whilst the activity was still fresh in their minds. Ten students out of 22 specifically said the only writing they do is in school or for homework because they have to and only three told me they still write at home for fun. Creating the visual images revealed to 12 students how much they used to write when they were younger, and reminded them that they did used to enjoy it. Of these, three specifically remembered enjoying writing in Year 6; Antonio wrote that the activity had made him realise how 'his path as a writer had changed'. All students apart from Joe were happy to have their artefacts displayed, although four students thought their work lacked creativity or was 'boring'. Joe wrote he did not want his work displayed because 'I do not like it.' My instinct is that some students were dissatisfied

with their presentation and visual artistic flair, which they thought had more value than their verbal creativity.

Their written answers demonstrated that many students in this class, whilst academically able, felt they lacked imagination, and disliked, with the exception of one student, absolute freedom to write. Students had negative opinions of writing generally. The fact that most of them do not write outside of school suggests that writing is seen as a scholarly activity rather than a pleasurable one. Perhaps Joe spoke for many when he wrote, 'I do not enjoy writing because it is a strenuous and gruelling task', echoing Vygotsky's view that writing requires 'so much more effort than speaking, [and] it is likely to need working on in order to produce a more satisfactory version' (McCallum 2012: 107).

Grainger, Gooch and Lambirth's study of teaching writing in primary schools revealed that within the seven schools where they carried out their research, 'high-stakes assessment coupled with prescription and accountability had influenced [teachers'] expectations and their practice, fostering a rather surface approach to teaching writing' (Grainger et al 2005: 5). They discovered that the style of teaching adopted by some of the teachers was 'atomistic and disembodied' with little sense of the reader (*ibid.*:7).

Surveys and interviews revealed the pupils' perspectives:

In essence, the younger learners, aged 5-7 years, were more enthusiastic about writing than the older pupils and had more positive views of themselves as writers. The children aged 7-9 years expressed predominately negative attitudes to writing, typically describing it as boring, whilst a small, but worrying proportion of those aged 9-11 reflected an indifferent, somewhat detached disposition.

These perspectives are reflected in my own students' attitudes to writing, which became more negative the older they got. The process of learning to write for the majority of the class seemed to be situated within primary school and there was no specific mention of adult involvement in writing at home, as there had been for the experience of reading with family members described in the Cliff Hodges study. If the teaching of writing within the primary school had been based largely on the National Literacy Strategy, which Bearne suggests, 'short-changes the ideational element' of writing (Bearne 2002, cited in Grainger et al 2012:7), then it could be that my students had not been taught the skills of idea generation necessary for writing, resulting in their current lack of confidence in that area.

Flash Fiction

McCallum argues that 'excessive focus on rules when writing limits the creative interplay between thought and writing. Writing no longer draws on thought for stimulation, but on a set bank of things to do' (McCallum 2012: 67). Rather than replicate the 'tedium' induced by offering rigid constraints to text-type work, he suggests that students can be guided to become skilled writers by using 'constraints in general rather than writing within the constraints of a particular text-type' (*ibid.*:67).

McCallum uses a technique he calls '*extreme re-creativity*' where 'students work within very rigid, often unusual bounds to help them think carefully about how meaning is created and transformed' (*ibid.*: 68). The use of flash fiction in the study echoes this idea in that students had to write within particular constraints, described below.

After reading and discussing some examples of flash fiction as a whole class, and prior to students beginning to write their own, I stipulated the success criteria: that it should be 'strange or enigmatic in effect... there should be a single storyline and a very small number of characters'. It should also 'present a single scene from which the reader must extrapolate' (T. Williams, in Earnshaw, S. 2014: 317) and there should be a maximum of 200 words. Students were given the option to work individually or to collaborate in pairs. I observed that students initially attempted to write individually but quickly fell into discussing their ideas with their friends who were seated nearby. They particularly enjoyed sharing their writing with each other and there was a supportive, celebratory atmosphere as they did so, demonstrating Glăveanu's We-paradigm and the importance of community in stimulating creativity.

Students were given the choice to write as they pleased, or combine the two sentence structure of *55 Miles to the Gas Pump* with the suicidal gay character from *It's OK if* they felt they needed a bit more structure.

Amir used the structure of *55 Miles* which is two paragraphs of one sentence each, and based the narrative on his recent dream of a zombie attack. Initially he struggled to think of something to write about and discussed his ideas with Rozzie, his neighbour. Both used the same subject matter but wrote different responses. Amir was able to meet the success criteria because he had had the opportunity to discuss his ideas before committing them to paper and could use his own imagination and areas of interest, in this case zombie apocalypse computer games. He said he enjoyed the flash fiction and it 'wasn't hard to write'. Despite the accomplishment of his written piece, I felt the value of the activity lay, as Robinson suggests, in the experience rather than the outcome, as he had gained confidence from completing a creative writing task successfully.

Figure 5: Amir's flash fiction

Flash fiction

2 Years in, still at his house, resting and relaxing, Jordan turns on the tv, friends is on, my favourite program, Caderyn turns the volume up because he can't hear the tv, They hear it outside, all of them, they patrol the streets day and night, slowly coming closer and closer to the living room window, they smack the window breaking through it.

We run upstairs and on to the roof, we know the only way to survive now is to jump onto street below, but Jordan is too scared to jump I push him, he falls into them below, his screams fill the air as they tear out his guts like animals.

Caderyn and I both knew our fate we were going to die, As they poured onto the roof we knew our time was up we were to become one of them.

At the end of the study, Amir was interviewed with two friends about their perceptions of the different creative writing activities. The three boys all said they preferred writing the flash fiction:

Amir: – because you have a lot of freedom with it - there's no guidelines – we can write how we want – it makes sense. I'm not a big fan of children's stories anymore. The sonnet – too structured and just like really boring – a bit pointless nowadays, especially for the time that we live in.

Joe: Flash Fiction, unstructured, you can just like do what you want – just get straight on with it.

AW: Do you feel more confident in your writing abilities?

Amir: Probably do feel slightly more confident but I'm not really sure if it's helped me a lot like with some of the stuff I didn't enjoy but the stuff I did enjoy helped me a lot.

AW: The key is the enjoyment?

Amir: Yeah.

Amir's answers suggest that if he experiences enjoyment or what Csikszentmihalyi calls a 'rewarding experience' (Csikszentmihalyi 2011: 3) he perceives an increase in confidence. Therefore, it could be inferred that in his case, enjoyment is synonymous with the perception of success, which leads to increased confidence.

Laura chose to combine the structure of *55 Miles* with the character from *It's OK*. Similar to Amir, she discussed her writing with her neighbour (Antonio) and they collaborated to write a story between them. The imagery of the character wearing

silver shoes and jacket came from their discussion as they based the protagonist on a character from a television programme they had seen, and they both used Antonio's then favourite word, 'mincing', to describe his movement. It is clear from comparing their stories that the first paragraph was written collaboratively and the second paragraphs were written individually. Laura later told me that 'thinking of an idea and making it imaginative enough is hard....it's difficult and takes me time to think and put it into words.' It seems that having gained an idea from her discussion with Antonio she was able to develop it in a more thoughtful way once she had had some time to think about it further. For Laura, the difficulty in coming up with an initial idea was overcome by being able to discuss things with her neighbour. Similar to Amir's writing, Laura and Antonio had based their stories on things they already knew, in this case a TV show.

Figure 6: Laura's flash fiction

Short stories

25th March 2015

~~Prepared, Walking~~

Looking in my wardrobe, picking out my silver shoes, my shiny jacket, mincing around my house, thoughts rushing through my mind, I was gay, I know what I have to do, the only option available was to commit suicide.

Being teased my whole life, promises being broken, I promised my parents, ~~they'd be so~~ ~~dis~~ how disappointed they'd be, what if they found my diary, the letters from him, they cannot find out, ~~+~~ ~~must~~ they cannot.

Emily did not discuss her work with her neighbour and wrote her first paragraph independently. However, she wanted to discuss her ideas about how to finish it with me, so I guided her back to Proulx's structure and the twist in the final line, which Emily incorporated into her writing. I felt her story was altogether more satisfying as it seemed to be based on a deeper empathy for the human condition and was not reliant on external stimuli like the previous two. Emily's flash fiction is highly evocative and the two narrative viewpoints make the writing more complex.

Figure 7: Emily's flash fiction

Wednesday 25th March

15/03/15

'It's OK' by Elleke Boehmer

FLASH FICTION

- 1 scene
- few characters
- extrapolate about background

*the screeching of tracks

HE

The man was a simple man, nothing fazed him, always jolly; yet ~~he was~~ impatient, a flaw he could never overcome, it was this that ~~fit~~ got him in the end, not the slow life draining of life, like everyone else; it was sudden, a flash of black, the thick smell of smoke, and then
65 nothing.

^{WE}
They found ~~it~~ a key ~~it~~ hidden in his pocket, stained with drying blood, the blood that was stored in the lab seven miles down; ~~it opened~~ the rusty chunk of metal ~~was~~ opened ~~the~~ ^{his} room, unseen for eleven years; ~~only one~~ ^{but} thing mattered, the ~~fat~~ worn notebook containing his life, his secrets, his note; the words revealing everything.

~~It didn't matter son, your life meant everything~~ But son, I already knew.

~~** his obvious signs of the signs of his true self, not the~~
not ~~the~~ ^{his} obvious ways of concealing it from ~~us~~ ~~them~~ ~~us~~

At the end of the lesson, 14 students wrote comments in their exercise books about their experience of writing flash fiction. All but one student wrote they found it

enjoyable, interesting or liked it very much. David, who did not like it, said it was 'not enjoyable' as he was 'not able to think or develop thought in a proper manner.' Nine students described their experience of writing flash fiction using terms that described varying degrees of difficulty, and one student said she 'found it fun because it was challenging.'

It is clear from the answers given that although students found the task challenging, most of them enjoyed it. Csikszentmihalyi says that 'balance of challenge and skill' are conditions that lead to the experience of flow (2011: 6) and this activity appeared to achieve that balance. Having the opportunity to share ideas and collaborate meant the desired creative environment was achieved, allowing for the generation of ideas which led to students being able to develop their writing independently.

Discussion and conclusions

At the beginning of the series of lessons, answers to my initial questions revealed that a lack of ideas was identified as the main block to creative writing by most students. This was still said to be the case at the end, despite having had access to a variety of stimulus materials. It was the opportunity to discuss ideas in friendship groups prior to writing them down that was perceived to be the most useful idea generating activity. Holly told me, 'I listened to people's ideas and adapted and changed them to fit my story and other ideas.' Grainger et al. suggest that 'frequent, planned and focussed opportunities for talk about texts are a prerequisite for developing writers (2005: 94). My study demonstrates the necessity for collaborative discussions at an early stage of the creative process which enables students to garner ideas before writing.

Of the three writing activities attempted, the majority of students stated they were most satisfied with their flash fiction; the view that there was freedom to write without

restrictions allowed the perception of greater creativity, which supports Beghetto and Kaufman and Cole et al.'s earlier findings. Students were not familiar with the conventions of flash fiction prior to our lessons and several said they did not think they would like it. Having the opportunity to read and analyse examples prior to the writing activity was viewed as important in enabling students to write, giving them confidence because they knew what was expected of them.

David was one of two boys who identified writing the sonnet as their most satisfactory form and can be described as 'outliers' in qualitative research terms. One of the strengths of the case study was that the combination of activities, as recommended by Cole et al., meant that at different points different students were inspired and enabled to be creative.

Future recommendations

Finding time to be creative is a problem in classrooms when we are under pressure to cover materials for high stakes assessment. The evidence from the 'Rivers of Writing' activity suggests that students' opportunities for creative writing become more limited the further up the school they go, even within so called creative writing lessons.

Students' own perception of difficulty lay with finding a starting point for creative writing. In future it would be most useful to concentrate on idea-generating activities in class early on in creative writing lessons, with a particular focus on the We-paradigm which favours collaboration and group work, and allows time to talk and explore emerging ideas. Karpova et al. suggest that 'creativity can be improved as a result of training and education' (2011:56). My study suggests that students will most likely require training in activities that lead to the generation of ideas to enable them to write

creatively. As Grainger et al. argue, 'there is a pressing need to attend to children's ideas, their generation, incubation and contemplation, since without these they have nothing to say, even if they do have the appropriate linguistic knowledge and editorial skills' (2005:8).

The multi-modal approach of the 'Rivers of Writing' activity could be developed to become a starting point for creative writing which reminds students that they do have something to say, rather than simply being used as a means of gathering students' views. In my case study, the unexpected bonus of this activity was that the resultant conversations led to a deeper insight into my students' lives and problem areas in English, whilst reinforcing the positive and trusting relationships I already had with them. This enabled the risk taking behaviours that Cole et al. argue are necessary for true creativity to occur, thus forming a virtuous circle.

Once ideas are generated in class, students could complete or redraft written work outside of lessons in an environment that allows for depth of concentration and 'flow'. Thus, the optimum conditions for creative writing could be said to be a combination of school and independent work, where the creative impetus comes from the We-paradigm in a 'responsive classroom environment' (Cole et al. 1999) and the student finishes the writing independently. Schools would need to find ways to overcome barriers for students who live in challenging circumstances or are unwilling to work at home. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to enable creativity in the classroom, but a variety of approaches over time will enable all students to maximise their creative potential as long as they have had the opportunity to collaborate and discuss ideas in the early stages of writing.

ⁱ Tony Blair –British Prime Minister (1997-2007)

ⁱⁱ Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Gove - Secretary of State for Education (2010–2014)

^{iv} Point, Evidence, Explanation

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