An atmosphere of possibility: Teaching creative writing

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ABSTRACT
This article offers suggestions for how teachers might create an atmosphere of possibility for their students to write creatively. It discusses a range of strategies that will help to engage students in writing.

Introduction
In this article I’d like to look at some of the ways teachers can re-energise their teaching of creative writing. Naturally every teacher will approach this subject in their own way. Some will be confident; some will be less so. I hope to be able to offer up some of my own experiences as a writer and creative writing teacher, as a way of modelling an excitement about writing which will be useful, perhaps even inspiring, to teachers in schools. And for ballast I’ll describe in some detail useful games, exercises and approaches that are proved to work in the classroom.

First-up, as a writer I find it best not to get too worried about outcomes. Sure, I want to write as well as I can. I want the students to write great things. But great things don’t come in a box, pre-packaged. So much school work is directed towards an outcome, a mark or an assessment. But creative writing is notoriously hard to mark. It just refuses to be put into boxes and ticked off. It could well be that a reluctant writer’s faltering two or three lines is a far bigger achievement than a confident writer’s half a page of workmanlike story. That’s the creative bit, the mysterious element. When I stand up in the classroom to begin a writing workshop, I hold the premise that nearly all the students have something to say even if it is just two or three lines. I encourage them to write in any form they like: poem, story, rap. My job is to create an atmosphere of possibility.

As a writer I try and push past my own self-consciousness and it’s how I encourage students. Because, if you’re consumed by the desire to get something down on paper, something important, your last and best word on the subject, you’re far less likely to be worrying about what other people XJMMUIJOL XIFUIFSJUTAHPPEPSACBEPSXIFUIFSJUXJMMHFUZPVBHPPENBSL We’re all writers here
This is important. It doesn’t matter how long the session goes; everyone is a writer including you the teacher. Everyone in the room is poised on the brink of discovering something about themselves, of giving a shape to something they didn’t know they had inside them. Being a writer means finding the right words for a feeling or an image; it means delighting in language. We all start from exactly the same place. So make sure that you too do at least some of the games and exercises.

Staying fresh
As a freelance writer working in schools, I have the luxury of being a novelty to the students. I might come into the school to do a one-off workshop; nobody there has seen or heard me before and, often as not, might never hear from me again. Sometimes I go back into the same schools with follow-up workshops and I’ve been involved with creative writing programs such as Writers’ Roadshow on the south coast of New South Wales, where the same students come back several years in a row. So I have
to keep surprising them with fresh games and exercises and new things to read aloud. The key, I find, is to keep myself fresh. I enjoy looking for new pieces to read out and writing a new piece or two for a particular age group. And I almost always participate in the games and exercises and read out my offering.

I will admit here that it’s not easy to dream up a good new exercise, but it’s always worth the effort. Personally I’d be sad if too many creative writing classes fell back on a more formulaic way of doing things. Filling in the adjectives for a given sentence or shuffling words around in a matrix means that each student will end up sounding remarkably like another. I’m aware that writing formulas can be very helpful for more reluctant writers and might even be a useful springboard to more interesting and original work, but I can’t help thinking that they are hardly an expression of originality. I find it a bit sad to go into a school and find thirty pieces of writing displayed on the wall of the foyer, each one looking and sounding like every other. I’d have to ask: what’s the point?

Kicking off

I like to get straight down to the business of writing rather than talking about it. I think there should be an opportunity to talk with students about how to improve their writing and doing this between exercises seems the right place to me, when there’s actually something to talk about.

As a kickstart to the workshop I can’t think of a better way than ‘secret’ writing. Secret (or automatic or stream) writing is the simplest of activities. It involves writing down whatever comes into the head. I ask the students to imagine the words flowing down their arms and out of the pen: ‘Keep the pen on the paper. Don’t worry about punctuation or even whether it makes sense.’ This is a great way to slide past self-consciousness. Ted Hughes, the famous UK poet, talked about the ‘inner policeman’. He’s the one looking over our shoulder saying: ‘That’s not very good.’ Secret writing is a way to banish him, not to even give him a look in. For a few minutes at least. And it’s also a reminder of the physicality of writing and the fact that it’s still about making marks on paper. (I wouldn’t be keen on middle school students using laptops. Also, I think it’s a very useful discipline to later type up the pieces on the school computers, making sure the work is properly edited.)

The key thing about secret writing is that it remains secret: ‘I stress that this if for you the student and you alone, not to be shown to anyone else and not to be read, even by you for the time being.’ I encourage students to do more secret writing in their own time and compile a few pages of it before they go back and see what they’ve written. They might well be surprised at what they find there. A phrase or an image can be a springboard for later writing.

Rhyming games/describe yourself/lies

Before embarking on more substantial tasks, I think it’s useful to do a quick exercise. It could be ‘Describe yourself in ten words.’ Or five lies about a certain object in the room. Or you could try a rhyming exercise. Get students to come up with as many rhymes for a particular word as they can. Write the words on the whiteboard in a line (or two.) Then begin with another word up on the whiteboard and continue in the same way. Once you have four or five lines, ask the students to choose a line and use all those rhyming words in that order in a poem or a piece. (This lends itself well to an attempt at rap.)

Hearing quality writing as a way to tune in

I like to read poems of different styles and moods as a way of creating an atmosphere. Poetry seems to work better than prose in this instance. Or I might read a strong piece by a student (in whatever form) as a way of inspiring the class. I don’t read too much as I tend to feel that less is more and it’s better not to have too many words whirling round the room. I would also recommend that the poem or piece is read and left ‘in the air’ and that no response from the students is asked for. Why? Because analysis and
critique in this instance would be counterproductive. As a writer, I don’t necessarily want to respond aloud to a great piece of writing I’ve just heard. I might have felt a very strong response but some of that feels almost secret and precious. Class discussion involving analysis and critique necessarily forms a large part of the education process, but a creative writing class is a place where it can be set aside. So many people have been turned off poetry for instance by having had to analyse it at school. What does a poem mean? Well, who knows? But what does a poem make you feel? Ah ha! The trouble is those feelings are often very hard to express. Good. Sad. Thoughtful.

It might sound obvious, but you do need to read the piece you have in mind as well as you can. Give it energy and make sure you’re clear about the tone. Is it sombre? Odd? Upbeat? Mysterious? You’re the one in charge and you’re able to create all kinds of different atmospheres. These might change quickly but the students will be able to switch easily from hearing something tragic to something comic.

The power of objects
An ancient Chinese poet once said (and I paraphrase him): ‘Write about the thing not the feeling.’ One of the biggest pitfalls for any writer is becoming conceptual and getting caught up in ideas. This is like conjuring with mist. Good writing is anchored in the physical world. Middle school students in my experience haven’t moved too far down that track, but it’s worth getting them to really focus on something concrete. Objects, because of their neutrality, can evoke interesting and powerful reactions. I usually bring a couple of boxes of characterful objects to my workshops. A strange-looking brass bird, a sea-bleached twisted stick, huge feathers, skulls, a plush monkey, a motley assortment of op-shop objets. You can have fun building up your own weird and wonderful collection and I can assure you it will be a great resource!

There would be a number of ways you could approach working with objects but the following seems to work well. I present an object to a group of three or so (or I might ask them which one they’d like from the box) and ask them to write a few lines about it. Just describe the object, its weight, texture, patina, colour. Handle it. Tell us about the flaws and cracks, the dirt and chips. Use your words to draw the object. Now, when that’s been done, move into the next stage which I describe as taking the object on a journey. Let it take you on a journey. Write the secret life of the object. Imagine how the object would speak. Describe where it has been or where it might be going. Use your imagination. Weird is good.

Getting the students to really look hard at something in front of them and write it down produces consistently good results. The world we live in is so full of stuff, much of it virtual and this is so distracting to a writer. The screen has gained an unholy power to hypnotise, but what’s the joy in describing anything on a screen when it can’t be lifted, opened, smelt and physically savoured?

I would encourage you to play around with writing games involving objects. I also make sure I take in some good chunky metal things (rusted metal items from tips or garage sales are good) because, let’s face it, the boys enjoy getting to grips with such items! The ‘tap-thing’ I take in has proved one of the most popular over time. Boys, in particular have written some memorable, even poignant pieces about this object.

If students want to draw their objects, after they’ve written about them, fine. I’ve had some lovely combinations of text and image over the years, the one adding lustre to the other. Material for the school magazine, indeed.

Student example: Object
The pot of desire has a rough black outside. It has a face, belly-button and its arms are together below its long slender nose.

This pot shows your deepest desire of what you will always want in your life. The way to get this
figured out is to put your finger between its nose and hand. It will bite you and you will bleed, place five drops (minimum) seven drops (maximum) in the top of the pot. The pot will show what you desire as a hologram. If eight or more drops of blood are put in the pot it will explode in orange smoke and you will be cursed with bad luck forever. This pot appears on the 29th of February in the Philippines on the coordinates that are unknown. (Jesse, Year 6, Broulee Public School)

Working outside: Entering the reverie

It might mean a bit more organisation but taking the students outside for a writing session can be a wonderful way of making them focus. It’s also a way of releasing that classroom-bound energy and harnessing it in a truly creative way. This session, I should stress, is not about running around outside having a great and therefore noisy time with their mates. No. It’s about working alone and with real concentration. (Your job is to make sure they don’t go too far and discourage them from forming little groups. Yes, I know it’s hard when some students seem to want to stick to each other like limpets.)

I tell the students that I want them to find a spot, a very particular spot that ‘speaks to them’. It will be their special spot and it doesn’t matter whether it’s on the grass, out in the open, under a tree, beside water or beneath the monkey bars. Before they disappear into the distance I stress they have to sit alone in that spot and write what they see in detail (as in the object exercise above.) This means writing down the ants, the pine-needles and the bark. But I also want them to write down what they feel about being in that spot. The place is speaking to them. What precisely is it saying? What about the wind or the distant hum of traffic mixed with magpie warble? I don’t go on too much about the five senses because I think that can easily become formulaic. I want them to enter into a kind of reverie with their place. A dream which is not about drifting but rather an act of entering their surroundings. This might sound a bit mystical but I can guarantee you it’s very powerful. It’s probably something that urban kids in particular do very little of, that is, just hanging out in a place alone, soaking it up and yes, dreaming. Inevitably some students might find this a bit hard, but it’s worth persisting.

Some of the most precious times I’ve had with writing workshops have been outside. I’ve been thrilled to see that students have come up with all I’ve been wanting and more, that they really have taken on the task and the place and have skilfully expressed that experience. I find this capacity of theirs particularly moving in this hard-edged, fast-paced, urban-centric world and would encourage it any time I could. I too take part in this writing. Because I’m part of the reverie.

Outdoor writing opportunities might be a bit limited at some schools. But it’s worth considering taking the students to a nearby park or, if you’re lucky enough to have one near the beach. Most schools would take their students to an outdoor centre once a year and I’d suggest you might be able to get them to do some outside writing once they’ve swung off every available rope, abseiled and kayaked themselves to a standstill.

Student example: My Place

Next to me slammed into the grass and dirt covered ground sits an old rotten post. It looks as if someone has kicked it because it is on a lean. In the background I hear the rainbow lorikeets chirping away and the whipbird making its magnificent call. The old post has many colours such as a yellow area around the back and some blue spray paint around the front. A little brown bird has just landed on some brown crumpled reeds and flies away into a nearby tree. The ants are scattering across the twig covered paving collecting little crumbs or leaves spread along the earth’s floor. Then I see some ants climbing up the post and climbing back down. Leaning against the post is a thorn bush swaying in the spring breeze. Little creatures scatter in the reeds with the bright hot sun beaming down on them and myself. (Carly, Year 6, Batemans Bay Public School)
Working with the natural world … inside
Middle school students respond well to writing about the natural world and in particular its creatures. Personally I do all I can to encourage this connection because it seems to slip away (or goes underground) for many in the later years of high school. I’m not so much interested in the factual side of things (all students will have done/be doing research into animals and the environment) as an imaginative inhabitation of, say, a creature. For example, I have an exercise where I tell students that a tiger has escaped from a local zoo and in the process taken the leg of its keeper. Now the tiger is on the run and having to decide where to head. For the hills? The sea? The town? I ask the students to imagine they are the tiger. What do they do next? Where are they going to find food? As you might imagine, this exercise has produced some vivid responses.

I’m sure there’s plenty of opportunity to open up the ‘animal theme’ with middle school students and I’d be urging teachers to have a go at this and come up with their own exercises and games. You could kick off by using a strong visual image of an animal. Perhaps a group of students could write a hunting chant. There are many possibilities. But for myself I’m clear I want to get at the essence of connection and stronger identification with the subject.

Talking about writing … how useful is it?
It might be worth here having a bit of a look at group discussion. How much should you talk to the students about their creative writing? Should you be telling them how to construct a story beyond asking for a good beginning, middle and end? How do you talk about what makes a poem? What about style?

I’m a bit wary of talking too much about writing with middle school age students. I said at the beginning of this piece that I trust students come to the workshop with something to say. My job is to create a sense of excitement so that they feel compelled to get something down on paper. I’m more concerned they do lots of writing because that’s the only way they’ll learn to express themselves in a more interesting, surprising and sophisticated way.

However … as a poet I feel there needs to be a bit of clarity around what makes a poem different from a story. The easiest thing for a student to understand is the length of lines. A poem tends to have shorter lines because it’s operating on a different (more obvious and urgent) rhythm and the language is compressed. Students will sometimes write a poem but set it out in prose form. It’s well worth reshaping it for them and being clear that yes, this is a poem. And no, a poem doesn’t have to rhyme!

As a teacher, you’ll be familiar with your students’ writing styles: the one that can’t help rhyming; the one who drifts off into obscure fantasy (Kings of Arg, the Monsters of Gish); the boy who needs to blow everything to bits before he’s even started; the girl who’s cruising and needs a bit of a nudge to lift her game. I think there’s a case for a workshop that addresses just the keen writers and pushes them along. I think there’s an equal case for a workshop where the writers are at different levels of ability. In both cases, getting the students to share their work is important. (Not forcing them to do so can be equally important and it’s your call!). It’s a great thing to see ‘slower’ students come up with a piece that impresses their peers. Or to see someone entertain the class in a way they haven’t before. The important thing is, good writing comes in many shapes and that doesn’t necessarily mean a neat package, all polite and well-behaved.

Student example: The wind
The wind, an invisible force
it swirls the surface of the water
it whispers and howls with remorse.
It is a carrier of sorts.
The wind, a shifter of smells  
it whips the air into streams  
it torments the sound in the bells … (Sam)

How about that for a blast of fresh air!

Editing – just the basics

I don’t feel there’s much point in engaging in editing beyond the correcting of typos and basic grammar. And making sure they’re consistent with their tenses. They’ll start in the past and suddenly it’s the present. Or vice versa. You’ll be doing them a big favour if you stress they have to know when the action is happening. Now? Or then? Style is trickier with the middle school ages. Students will often use far too many adjectives because they think it makes for better writing. (They might have been told this. As a corrective you could get them to write a piece without using any adjectives.) Cliché is certainly a pitfall. It takes gentle and persistent pointing out. Students need to get accustomed to not taking the easy way out. They need to hear how to write fresh, dynamic, original writing and feel emboldened and empowered enough to have a go themselves. I trust that the more they write (and hopefully share), the more they will recognise good writing, original writing, entertaining writing.

As an example, how do you shift boys away from endless sequences of guns and bombs? I think you have to be clear that this approach can get boring. You don’t want to discourage them or put a dent in their energy, but you’d like to be surprised by something a bit different. Ask them to consider their audience.

I also think you need to offer the more reluctant boys a way to feel what they’re doing is important and necessary. If writing is not about an urgent need to communicate something, what is it about?

Extreme situations

I feel strongly that boys in particular need some positive role-modelling around being a writer. They need to see that writing is an exciting, demanding, necessary, fun and above all cool thing to do. I make sure that fairly early on in a writing workshop I introduce the element of extremity. This is probably weighted a bit more toward the world-of-boy though the girls take to it very happily too.

The main thing to remember when offering up an extreme situation is to make it physical. For instance being trapped underground by a rockfall. I set the scene by saying: ‘You have been trapped underground by a rockfall. You’ve been there for two days. The right side of your body is pinioned by rocks. You can move your left arm but can’t reach your backpack. This contains food and a knife. There’s a steady drip of water from the roof of the chamber which you are just able to drink. It’s almost pitch dark but you can just make a few shapes out.’ Now write what happens. Or, I read a piece about being in solitary confinement and get them to write their version. They’re in a tiny cell with no window. The food is disgusting, there are rats and worst of all they’ve been there for a year and don’t even know why. They have to write a letter to someone on the outside telling them how terrible it is and why they need to be free.

Just as an example: if I wanted the class to write about the subject of refugees I wouldn’t mention the words ‘justice’ or ‘truth’; I would tell the students they are on a fishing boat in the middle of the ocean. It smells. It rocks unpleasantly. There’s not much food. What’s that like? Scary? Well go on, write it.

Do you see where I’m aiming? This goes back to the ancient Chinese poet who said ‘write about the thing not the feeling’. Strong writing is actually about casting a spell by evoking the thing, the physical situation so clearly we all see it and feel ourselves to be right there. This is so much harder when a writer is grappling big abstract words like ‘justice’ or ‘fear’ or ‘sadness’.
Humour

I enjoy the challenge of trying to create and foster a mixture of moods or atmosphere in the creative writing class. Obviously the above 'extremity' will tend towards the more sombre. But even in this situation some students will find humour. Actually, as every teacher knows, some kids can find a bit too much humour in _everything_. For them the challenge is to keep on track with the serious stuff.

I do feel though that humour is a wonderful way to keep things spinning along. Paradoxically, I find the students are able to write their more serious-minded stuff when they’re having a good time.

But it would be sad not to encourage the wonderful sense of the ridiculous that middle school kids have. And it’s a great energy-source for their writing. I love encouraging them to go down this track but make it clear their writing has to make sense, however surreal or wacky the situation. The logic has to be in place. I might give them titles such as ‘I am a worm’, ‘I’m an angry old lady’, ‘I’m a wheelie-bin’, ‘My Dad is an alien’ and read an example. What I’m after here is a comic monologue and it’s worth explaining what this is briefly. But really there’s potential for humour in all of the exercises. Enthusiastic students might like to try a limerick. Make sure you’re really clear on the rhyme and rhythm scheme.

_An old lady who lived in a shack_
_kept a crocodile chained out the back._
_When visitors came_
_she’d call it its name_
_‘O sweetheart, I’ve brought you a snack.’ (Harry Laing)

_Student example: My Dad is an alien_

_My Dad is an alien_
_what will I do_
_his skin is glowing_
_I have to grab my shoe_
_His head is a weird shape_
_and he has three eyes_
_his nose has four nostrils_
_I’m about to cry_
_he has no teeth_
_his arms are growing one by one_
_Why does this happen?_
_Why am I his son?_
_But soon I find out_
_something I’d never have guessed_
_it is just a bad habit_
_now my dad is the best. (Marcus, Year 6, Broulee Public School)_

Some final reflections and suggestions

It will be fairly clear by now as to where I’m coming from as a teacher of creative writing. Perhaps what I’ve been saying sounds over-simplistic or even a bit left-field. I’ll leave that to others to decide. As a writer I know full well the process of writing is an odd and unpredictable thing. Writing can’t be reduced to a formula and it can’t be turned out like sausages. I’m always surprised, sometimes astonished, by what students come up with. And there’s much of their work I never see, if they’ve chosen not to share it with the class. So often the quiet ones are producing great work. If there’s one word I’d like to use to describe a creative writing class that’s humming along, it’s excitement. This
can be quiet! Or it can be boisterous. But it comes from every student reaching deeper into their imagination and flexing their language muscles in order to come up with something of worth. If as a teacher you can model that excitement and that sense of discovery of the world through words, a discovery you are also making, quality writing will flow from your students.

So let’s get practical!
Okay, you’re fired up and ready to go. What now? Can you persuade your school that they need to spend a bit more time on creative writing and make it more of a focus? How about suggesting a day or even a week where the normal curriculum is suspended and the whole school writes. (This could be combined with other creative activities.) It would need to be flagged well in advance and the enthusiasm accordingly built up.

Or how about beginning a program which will bring writers into the school on a regular basis (it could be once or twice a year) to run workshops. This could involve talented students and be designed to give them a boost and a push or it could aim to galvanise students at every level.

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