

BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH SCHOLARSHIP

What is the role of creative writing in fulfilling assessment objectives (2i) and (4) in AS level English Literature?

1. What were your original aims?

To consider the role of creative writing in relationship to the assessment objectives at AS level English Literature, particularly 2i *to do with understanding genre and 4 to do with establishing independent opinions and judgements*. The research was to apply to two classes of lower sixth English students over an academic year from Sept 2003 – June 2004. The groups were taught by three different teachers and had two texts in common - Shakespeare (Othello) and Miller (The Price) and four distinct – Browning (Selected Poems) , Emily Bronte (Wuthering Heights), Four Women Poets (Duffy, Lochead, Kay, Clarke) and Ian McEwan (A Child in Time).

2. In what ways did you refine your aims?

During the year, it became apparent that discrete creative writing tasks were being squeezed out of the original planning for the course. This was partly led by the nature of the groups and the amount of extra time they needed for researching and reading for contextual understanding as well as the amount of class time devoted to teacher led analysis of texts. These two strands of learning were deemed a priority if the groups were to establish a confident and authoritative basis on which to think and write about texts for the AS examination. It was also decided to include a third lower sixth group, taught by a further two teachers, in the research process. This group shared the same Shakespeare and Miller texts.

Consequently, it was decided to focus on the perception of sixth formers in an academically selective school on the learning methods, of which creative writing was one, they found most helpful in attaining the assessment objectives at AS level .

3. Which research processes did you find helpful?

The most helpful process was a written document of six open questions which related to the AS course that year. The students completed it during the week following their AS papers so they were in a position to make immediate value judgements in relation to the tasks demanded by the examination.

4. Which research processes did your pupils find helpful?

Although the questionnaires were completed individually at home, the students found it helpful to discuss what kind of response each section might suggest and several expressed the desire for extended questioning in an informal personal interview about their views. Students tended to see their learning in terms of individual teachers' contributions rather than as a range of methods which contributed jointly to the learning process.

5. What were the learning points you gained from undertaking the research and what were your findings?

Students often expressed ambiguous attitudes towards creative writing. Although many felt disappointed that creative writing was not recognised by the examination process, when asked about specific moments of learning during the course, most focused on essay writing skills. Some students commented that creative writing was particularly helpful when studying poetry. Students generally perceived that, what one student called, "robust criticism" of essays by the teacher in class was a major contributing factor to feelings of confidence and success in AS examination papers. Similar comments by other students to the question "Can you identify the activities which helped you most in attaining the objectives of the course?" included the response "teacher led analysis was best because it was the most focused" and "you need the teacher for Shakespeare".

Many students commented that kinaesthetic exercises through drama, games and experiencing live theatre offered opportunities for clarification at key moments in the course. This perception was justified by exam performance as 87% of students achieved higher marks in Unit 2707 (Shakespeare) which had offered more of these specific learning moments compared to Unit 2708 (Poetry and Prose). Students appeared surprised at the usefulness of independent reading and research but some felt that greater guidance from the teacher in whether independent work should supplement or support teacher directed activities would be useful.

6. What evidence relates to this learning and your findings?

Examination grades were generally high with 88% A and B grades, justifying students' perceptions and confidence. Data collected from student questionnaires suggests that although students did not generally perceive that creative writing was the most important development tool in their understanding of texts and how to analyse them in examination conditions, their performance was enhanced in Unit 2707 which two out of the three groups had prepared for through creative writing exercises. Analysis of students' individual creative work - poetry, prose and dramatic monologues, suggests that students' independent views are expressed and possibly formulated through finding their own words and images to represent aspects of texts. It is also perhaps significant that only one of the original students left the course after AS level.

7. What are the questions for your future practice?

The most important question is how to create a balanced course for the student which gives them a whole experience of text whilst supporting their preparation for specific examination questions. A further issue is the need to balance teacher directed learning with developing autonomy in students. A practical outcome of the research was a renewed commitment to incorporate creative writing in the next year's AS course in the delivery of both Unit 2707 and Unit 2708.

8. What are the questions for your school?

A primary issue for the school is that of pupil voice. The students consulted showed a high degree of commitment and lucidity in interpreting the learning processes at AS level and would be able to contribute to a wider discussion of pedagogy. Another consideration for the school is the allocation of appropriate staff to AS level teaching since confidence in the teacher is deemed to be a significant factor in students' perceptions of their self confidence and hopes of success. The question of progression is also one which the school could address in its enabling of students to understand the relationship between creative writing and exam performance at an earlier level.

9. Are there any questions for further research?

A question that arises from the data collection concerns the role of drama in meeting assessment criteria at AS level. Students perceive it as a motivational and creative tool in working with text and it would be useful to ascertain whether this applied only to drama texts or to prose and poetry as well.

10. How did you disseminate your findings with others?

My findings have been discussed at departmental level, they may be published in the school newsletter to staff, governors and parents and they have been presented at the English Research group run by Sue Brindley at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.

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