



## **Redefining the Students' Contact with Literature via Creative Writing and Reading**

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### **Abstract**

*How can Creative Writing – and Creative Reading as a related procedure – enhance the teaching of literature, annihilating, or at least reducing, the students' resistance to it? Despite voices that question the utility and necessity of Creative Writing, it is proved – through Creative Writing applications and research in typical junior High School classrooms as well as in Creative Writing Workshops – that this medium reduces the students' fear towards mistakes, empowers creativity in learning, enhances creative attitude towards life and promotes Creative Literacy, as students “try their hands on” Literature. Creative Writing permits a combination of reception/reading, analysis and practice, which are basic ingredients of creative literary education. Creative Writing, in other words, transforms Literature Teaching into a constructive art, based not only on literary records but mostly on literary action. Teaching literature through Creative Writing and Reading, teachers can exploit and combine different pedagogical instruments: the Objective Theory (focus on critical reading and writing), the Mimetic Theory (focus on mimesis writing), the Expressivist Theory (focus on free expression through free jotting, automatic writing etc.) and the Pragmatic Theory (focus on reader-response and on polyphonic reading and writing). Creative Writing, in connection to Creative Reading, not only leads to reading and critical efficiency but also to imaginative exploration and accomplishment. How can one assess the students' texts in a Creative Writing classroom or workshop? For the assessment of Creative Writing and its related dilemma, it is up to the teacher to sustain an equilibrium: on the one hand, assessment is important, as it leads to improvement, on the other hand it must be moderated so as not to become a kind of force/power imposed to students' creativity. Creative Writing and Creative Reading, applied in a typical classroom as a tool of teaching literature as well as in a Creative Writing Workshop as a tool of self-expression, can transform radically and positively the way students confront Literature: indifferent or resistant students who don't enjoy literature or question its utility seem to discover, via Creative Reading and Writing, the textual power that derives from the literary text as well as from their own imagination.*

**Keywords:** *Creative Writing, Creative Learning, Literature Teaching, Assessment, Creative Literacy*

### **1. Introduction**

How can Creative Writing – and Creative Reading as a related procedure – enhance the teaching of literature, annihilating, or at least reducing, the students' resistance to it? Teaching literature via Creative Reading and Creative Writing seems to transform positively the way students of a typical classroom as well of a Creative Writing Workshop react towards literature, provided that a certain methodology related with how Creative Reading and Creative Writing can be taught and assessed is known and exploited by the Literature teacher. In this paper, a short theory frame is presented in combination with selected applicable examples of Creative Reading and Creative Writing Activities, that can facilitate the integration of Creative Reading and Writing in the literature classroom or in the Creative Writing Workshop. The theory developed in this paper and the proposed activities derive from experience and research of several years on the field of teaching literature through Creative Reading and Writing in Junior High Schools of Greece and of Cyprus, and in teachers' training programmes on the didactics of literature.

### **2. Creative Reading and Writing**

#### **2.1 Definition**



The paternity of the term “Creative Reading” belongs to Ralph Waldo Emerson (2001: 60). Its correlation with the term “Creative Writing” is traced in the Emerson’s phrase “There is then creative reading as well as creative writing” (Richardson, 2009: 7). According to Emerson, the act of reading enhances the act of writing. Creative Reading presupposes the transaction between reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1994; 1995) and is described as a creative adventure, a “poetic” event [*poiein* = create] (Rosenblatt, 1994: 12, 20-21). Rosenblatt introduces the term of aesthetic reading –relatively opposed to the term of efferent reading– in order to describe what happens to the reader (mentally, emotionally, mnemonically) while reading and guided by the text grid.

Creative Writing, on the other hand, though multiply defined, can be described in, at least, three ways (Berry, 1994: 56): (a) as a procedure of creative reaction which requires the activation of imagination and of critical thought, reading efficiency and fluctuating freedom (Harper, 2013; Gross, 2010); (b) as a pedagogical method of experiential approach of the literary text, and (c) as a way of reading Literature, as well as a new literature theory established on the writer’s glance (Kotopoulos, 2012; Kotopoulos & Nanou, 2015). Creative Writing is a product of four itineraries (Dawson, 2005): i. of creative self-expression (Creative Writing becomes a way of expression and of self-discovery), ii. of literacy (Creative Writing is aiming to the acquisition of writing efficiency), iii. of craft (Creative Writing presupposes theoretic background, as well as writing knowledge and techniques) and iv. of reading “from the inside” (Creative Writing leads to the acquisition of reading proficiency). We strongly support that Creative Reading and Creative Writing presuppose one another.

## **2.2 Creative Reading and Writing Pedagogy**

Concerning the way Creative Reading and Writing can be taught, a combination of different pedagogical “lences” can be functional (Donnelly, 2009/2012): the Objective Theory (focus on critical reading and writing), the Mimetic Theory (focus on mimesis writing), the Expressivist Theory (focus on free expression through free jotting, automatic writing etc.) and the Pragmatic Theory (focus on reader-response and on polyphonic reading and writing). The Objective Theory employs elements from the New-Critic theory such as close-reading, poetic features, narrative techniques; in this case, however, literature teaching is not reduced in a new-critical reception of the text, but basic theoretical knowledge is used in the classroom to understand and create an interpretation of the text, and students’ texts as well which are inspired by the main literature text. The Mimetic Theory permits activities on the literature text where creative mimesis is activated. This mirroring technique enhances attention and observation of the literature text and leads to the development of a personal filter towards it. The Expressivist Theory encourages the students to express themselves through activities such as free jotting, free/automatic writing etc. The Expressivist Theory appears in the “expressivist curriculum” inaugurated by Hughes Mearns, who first replaced the traditional literature class by Creative Writing courses (Myers, 1996: 103), aiming at teaching the students and not teaching literature. Finally, the Pragmatic Theory, based on Reader-Response, centers on the reception of the literature text by the students and revives their act of reading and writing. Through these theories, provided that the teacher has the knowledge and the experience to keep a balance between them, literature reading inspires literature writing and vice versa.

## **2.3 Creative Writing Assessment**

How can one assess/grade Creative Writing? The assessment dilemma (Hugo, 1992) related to Creative Writing is connected, negatively, to the authority that derives from the one who assesses (Brophy, 1994), authority that can intimidate the student-writer, and, positively, to the fact that the appropriate assessment is a precondition for self-improvement. Given that Creative Writing is inserted in the school environment –an environment where assessment has a significant presence– and that an “easy A” on Creative Writing course leads to its underestimation, while a strict assessment risks to enhance the writer’s block, we suggest a variety of assessment strategies, such as descriptive assessment, encouraging assessment, and occasionally no feedback (Zeigler, 1989) in evaluation-free zones (Elbow, 1993).

## **3. Teaching Literature via Creative Reading and Creative Writing**

### **3.1 Creative Reading Activities**

During the procedure of Creative Reading, questions/prompts that combine critical and creative thinking (Langer, 2012) and cohabite creative and critical reading (Runco, 2003) can be employed, such as:



- Aesthetic questions (What were your feelings during reading? Where you touched most by this text? Did this text revive any memories? Did you identify with persons or circumstances presented in the text?) (Bleich, 1975a; 1975b).
- Cognitive questions/prompts (Present/Describe the heroes and the era of the story. Who is narrating the story? Is he/she participating in it?).
- Convergent questions/prompts (Explain the phrase/the verse... How would you explain the writer's/poet's choice to...? Locate analogies and differences between...).
- Divergent questions/prompts (Rewrite the passage... changing the narrative point. What does the text gain or lose? What would happen if...? Propose a different ending).
- Evaluative questions (Did you like the text or not? Why? Would you recommend this text to a friend?)

Different techniques can also be used to enhance the process of Creative Reading, such as:

- Text scanning: observation of external characteristics of the text format.
- Segmental reading: reading of the text with cuts scheduled by the teacher in order to stimulate imagination (Iser, 1980), imagistic vision (Iser, 1980), and the readers' expectations and interest.
- Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) (Hunt, 1970; McCracken & McCracken, 1978), so as to imitate private self-willed reading for pleasure (McCracken & McCracken, 1978; Spiegel, 1981).
- Improvised dramatization: transformation of scenes of the text, chosen by the students or the teacher, into short theatrical parts.

### 3.2 Creative Writing Activities

In parallel with Creative Reading Activities, different Creative Writing Activities can be employed: some of them are anchored to the literary text, such as rewriting a passage through a different narrative angle, completing the text gaps, rewriting a poem without its rhyme, playing with the style of the text (Queneau, 2013).

Several Creative Writing Activities, quite original and customized to the needs and the level of junior high school students, are anthologized in the book "Creative Writing: Navigation Instructions" by M. Souliotis and his team (2012). The target of this book is to support the students' practice in literature writing so as they develop their creative and their reading efficiency. The book can be used by teachers of Primary and of High Schools, offering a variety of activities and of instructions. Indicatively, selected examples of Creative Writing activities from the aforementioned book are listed below:

- Texting/SMS ("warming up" activity) (Souliotis et al., 2012: 94).

In this activity students are asked to write messages as if they were texting on their smartphones. They can be asked to write randomly messages and then, after rereading them, to transform them into a form of slam/oral poetry. The use of adolescent "slang" renders this activity attractive; at the same time, unconsciously, students are welcomed in the metaphorical, symbolic and elliptic poetic language.

- Escalation/Climax (Souliotis et al., 2012: 123).

Students are asked to escalate random words (belonging to the adolescents' idiom or related to certain characteristics of actors, athletes, singers etc., e.g. "bold", "beautiful", "innovative" etc.). The words are written on the whiteboard according to their meaning, in an ascending or descending scale. Through this activity, students realize that words may denote different levels of meaning as well as their metaphorical sense. This may function as an initiation in the unfamiliarity of poetic language.

- Literal vs Metaphorical meaning (Souliotis et al., 2012: 127).

Students are asked to write a poem using only literal meanings and afterwards to rewrite it through metaphors. This replacement exercise through the analogy of meanings helps students realize the power of metaphorical meaning.

Example:

By the roads of the city  
I wait alone  
My heart beats fast  
I am afraid

By the roads of my mind  
I sit on the rock of solitude  
My heart dances on the beat of agony  
Like a frightened deer

- Poetic recipe (Souliotis et al., 2012: 141).

Students are asked to write the "recipe" of a feeling, of a situation etc. Through this playful activity, they realize the specificity of poetic language, that lies in the unexpected combinations of words.

Example: The love recipe



#### Ingredients

2 hearts

1 spoon of trust

3 promises that won't be kept

1 cup of tears

.....

#### Performance

We open the heart like a book.

We add the trust, the tears and the promises, we stir them lightly and we boil the mixture, not to much, for the eternity...

- Weather forecast (Souliotis et al., 2012: 112).

Using stereotype phrases from weather forecasts, we encourage students to express a feeling. Through this activity "lower" textual genres, such as the weather forecast, are elevated, while students energize their imagination and language creativity.

Example:

Cataractous rains will fall during your absence

Violent winds will be raging in the coast of memory...

- Textual Montage (Souliotis et al., 2012: 127).

Sergei Eisenstein supported that the art of montage was applied in literature before its application in cinema. There are many examples of literature montage that can be used as a sample and a study field for students to observe and to apply. The literature montage activity, i.e. the use in writing of cinematographic techniques related to the scenes and to cinematic shots helps students understand the narrative techniques of a literature text.

## 4. Conclusion

Creative Reading and Writing can elevate the teaching of Literature and improve the way adolescent students communicate with literature texts. Through carefully selected activities of Creative Reading and Creative Writing, students can realize the form and power of literature language, cultivate their creativity and divergent thinking, develop skills of literature literacy and experience the delight of reading and writing. A creative approach in teaching Literature presupposes an experienced teacher, who believes in teaching with and for creativity and permits his students' voices to be heard. In a literature classroom or in a Creative Writing Workshop, the coexistence of Creative Reading and Writing can transform spectacularly the reception of literary texts and the students' stance towards literature. In Greece and Cyprus, the exploitation of Creative Reading and Creative Writing in literature teaching fortunately expands in a fruitful way, thanks to the insertion of Creative Writing in the Literature Curriculum.

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