

## **Creative writing for Creative Reading** **Antoinette Moses**

Whenever I give a talk about creative writing in the classroom, I begin with the statement that my first task when I teach creative writing to students who are not used to writing freely is to try to unlock their creativity. This may seem strange in an article about readers and reading. Surely it is the writer who has to provide the creativity. The reader reads. I don't believe that. I believe that reading is a creative act and that the text comes to life when it is read. As Wolfgang Iser noted, the meaning of the text is created by the reader.

As the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text and relates the different views and patterns to one another he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too.<sup>1</sup>

For some of you this may immediately appear to be worrying. Surely reading is simple. You give your students the stories and check their comprehension. But how far does that take the student? Does it excite them and make them want to read more? Does it fully engage them? Does it empower them?

There lurks in the mind of some teachers the feeling that students hover at the edge of a chasm of creative anarchy and if you allow them to think for themselves, they may topple over. Moreover, time constraints and the demands of the curriculum mean that you are pressed to do just what you already do. You do not have time to experiment and creative writing is not essential. Indeed, creative writing does ask students to explore, open up and experiment. You will not find 'creativity' in a dictionary of connotations alongside concepts such as 'limited', 'restricted' or 'narrow'.

Not all writing activities stimulate the imagination. There are some creative writing exercises that are comprehension activities in disguise, but it is not these which will most

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<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Iser, (1978) *The Act of Reading*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, p. 21

excite your students. What I would like to suggest here are a couple of creative writing activities that allow the student to become an active reader, engaged in a creative act of reading. These are activities to undertake before and after reading a reader. I know from feedback from teachers around the world that employing these kind of creative writing activities in the language class enables students to practise and gain confidence in both speaking and writing skills and – and this is an important ‘and’ – it helps them read. (Some similar activities are also suggested in Sue Leather’s article, “What’s in a story?” on this website.)

When I think of students reading this series of original fiction, I am taking it for granted that these stories encourage swift reading at a level that is easily comprehended and encourages further reading (as Philip Prowse suggests in his guide to successful reading), so that the students enjoy the process, and that their imaginations are stimulated.

You can give the students creative writing activities to do both before and after they read the books, but I personally do not favour while-reading activities. Get them excited about what they are going to read and what they have read. Reading is an important and enjoyable activity on its own and I don’t think it should be interrupted.

### **Activities before reading**

#### **I want to be...**

Begin by eliciting a list of needs from students. For example: I want to be free/ a great footballer/ famous/ rich/ a movie star. Then ask them who would have these needs and who or what is preventing them from fulfilling or achieving these needs? Then get the class to choose one from the list and describe a character with that need and think what is stopping them. Then develop this into a story. After that they might read “One of the Lads”, a story from *Frozen Pizza and Other Slices of English Life*. This is a story about a boy who belongs to a gang of football fans, but really wants something quite different.

**Parallel texts (this activity is before and after reading)**

Choose a reader and decide what you think its theme is. Then ask students to write stories on the same theme. The students then read the reader. You then ask them to compare their story with the one in the book and ask them which one they prefer and why. Such an activity empowers the student and gives them confidence. Similar activities can include writing about similar characters or similar situations.

**Activities after reading****Adapt your story**

Some of the most creative activities after reading are forms of adaptation. Students can rework a thriller into a video game. Or they can rewrite scenes as plays. A variant on this is to ask students to guess what happens next in a story. They then choose the one version they like best and can turn this new scene into a play. (This activity has been developed from one by Rob Pope whose book *Textual Interventions* offers a range of such activities.)<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the activities, the main factor that links them is that the student feels that their creative input is important. Their creative writing enables them to become active and engaged creative readers.

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<sup>2</sup> Rob Pope, (1995) *Textual Intervention*, London: Routledge