POETRY FROM SCRATCH: ENHANCING CREATIVITY IN THE CLASSROOM

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My workshop series Jumpstart Your Writing: Poetry from Scratch aims to enhance creative potential, empowering participants to discover unique voices as poets. This paper will evaluate these workshops in the light of the general literature on creativity and Urban's componential model.

This continuing education program comprised three morning workshops, which were available to the general public, attracting professional writers as well as novices. Many of the participants were middle-aged women. There was no formal assessment.

Rationale

'New songs, new ideas, new machines are what creativity is about' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.8). '(It) does not exist in a vacuum, but in a particular field' (Cropley & Urban, 2000, p.487). It seems therefore practical to enhance creativity within that field. My course aims to enhance the creative expression of the participants by offering them a toolbox of techniques to 'jumpstart' their writing. It is expected that they will write poems, with the wish that they will be inspired to continue to do so after the course is over. I think it is reasonable to suggest that the creative product need only 'fulfill the healthy expression of one's inner reality' (Lamoureux, 2006, p.6). My experience leads me to agree with poet Mary Oliver (1994, p.xvii) that 'even without a blazing talent, almost everyone can learn to write good poems'.

Although it seems that there is a need for research to determine under what classroom conditions creative potential can be realised (Cohen, 2003), I agree with Runco (2007, p.373) that 'if environments and experiences are carefully chosen, the prepared mind will value creativity and enjoy new and original thinking'.

I chose Urban's model of creativity (Cropley & Urban, 2000) as an evaluative tool not only because it emphasises six components that work for and in the creative process but because it is also cognisant of the importance of environmental conditions that support them. The model incorporates three cognitive components:

1. divergent thinking and acting
2. general knowledge and thinking base
3. a specific knowledge base and area-specific skills.

It also mentions three personality components:

1. focusing and task commitment
2. motivation and motives
3. openness and tolerance of ambiguity.

Urban states that environments that are nurturing, stimulating, inspiring and cultivating encourage the creative process (Cropley & Urban, 2000, pp.491–492).

Environment

The 'workshop' structure is the basis for the organisation of my classroom. Each class involves warm-ups, a mini-lesson, a choice of individual and group activities, and group sharing. My teaching style is the other significant factor in creating the atmosphere: the literature proposes several factors that characterise creative classrooms.

The creative classroom needs to be a 'psychologically safe' zone, a place where unorthodox and unusual ideas can be expressed without fear of ridicule (Piirto, 2004, p.48; Cramond, 2001, p.405; Cohen, 2003, p.50). There is a game like or playful tone (Runco, 2007, p.442; Piirto, 2003, p.49). The environment limits distractions and time pressure (Cramond, 2001, pp.405, 427; Piirto, 2004, p.37; Heilman, 2005, p.16; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.118). There is a balance of stimulation and reflection time (Amabile, cited in Runco, 2007, p.355; Cramond, 2001, p.405). Finally, the environment allows individuals to work with autonomy (Cramond, 2001).

My class incorporates these factors in at least five ways.

First, I tell students from the first day that they have permission to play, make mistakes, and take risks, because no one writes a good poem every time they sit down. I speak to them honestly about my own writing process. I verbally recognise and accept all their ideas in class discussions and brainstorming sessions.

Second, I enthusiastically model the risk-taking and open-ended thinking that I wish to encourage. I lead from the front with my passion and enthusiasm for poetry. A student commented,
'I LOVED taking your class — it really did
jumpstart my poetry writing. Your energy and
enthusiasm for poetry were contagious, and
somehow created an environment in which I
could think sideways.'

Third, one of the most important things a creative
writing teacher can do is truly listen. When
students share their work, it is important to give
feedback that will not shut them down. No one in
my class is ever forced to share, but many are
anxious to do so, either in a group or in a private
space with me. In group sharing, I begin by
asking the writer to read; I then ask a volunteer to
say what the poem was about, and if the writer
agrees with the summary, we move on. If not, s/he
will understand that more drafting may be
necessary. The group then offers comments about
what we liked about the poem. I model being
really specific; I will comment on a line, a word,
or an image, something that works. I will say
how the words made me feel. Instead of
criticising the poem, I then invite questions about
what may or may not have been clear, so the
writer sees what needs to be done. If the writer
asks for suggestions we offer, but they must ask,
and I make it clear that acceptance of any advice
is voluntary. Private conferences follow a similar
risk-free format. I also invite my students to join
a weekly workshop of local poets, where
participants bring copies of a poem in progress
for group feedback. This group models the joyful
risk-taking and hard work of a creative group
supporting each other in the ongoing process of
self-expression. Many of the students became
regular members of the group. One student
commented on the value of the group share: 'I
know I received many helpful comments. The
question "what is this poem about?" seemed
necessary to me. I never thought of that as a way
to look at poetry. Now I always ask myself,
would anyone get it?'

Fourth, my class warm-ups strive for a playful
atmosphere. I vary them according to my mood
and my sense of the group's tolerance. I may use
improvisational drama games such as the 'big
gesture', creative movement to music, or
metaphor games.

Fifth, the poetry workshop framework allows for
a balance of stimulation and reflection time.
There is adequate time to write in class, and if
students need a silent space to work, I always
have a place organised for them. I also encourage
students to create a private space in their own
lives so they can keep writing. Students have
choice at every point in time. There is no
pressure to finish a particular assignment, and
there is no grading.

**Strategies**

My own experience as a poet has taught me that
sometimes poems come spontaneously and at
other times I must intentionally use tactics to get
going. This leads me to use what Runco (2007,
p.325) calls 'let it happen' techniques for
spontaneous creativity as well as 'make it happen'
techniques for more intentional creativity. I also
give my students long-term and short-term
strategies for their writing.

'Let it happen' techniques are based on the idea
that creativity is there and all that is needed is to
remove the blocks (Runco, 2007, p.355; Cramond,
2001, p.425). Many blocks are shifted
as a result of the classroom atmosphere
previously described, but there are some
techniques which assist. I am a big fan of
automatic free writing (Lemons, cited in Runco,
2007, p.325; Cameron, 1995, p.20). I use the
technique in class as a warm-up activity and offer
it in my supplementary materials 'Journal
Jumpstarts' (Appendix 2). One of the
characteristics of the 'flow' experience is the
merging of the action and awareness; with
automatic writing we strive for that merging in a
mindful way. We write for a certain amount of
time with a prompt word or phrase and just keep
the pen moving no matter what comes. The
writer Freeman Dyson (cited in
Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.121) says, 'I always
find that when I am writing, it is really the
fingers that are doing it and not the brain.'
Automatic writing can make up for some of the
fluidity that adults have lost over the years; its
non-goal-orientated improvisation can help them
break through to a less conscious and critical
frame of mind and then to a more intuitive,
imaginative modality. Poets James Merrill,
Yeats, and Octavio Paz used this technique
(Piirto, 2001, p.66).

Another 'let it happen' strategy is to allow
students to write about what interests them. The
activities on all three workshop days are all open-
ended enough to allow students to choose their
own topics. The second day's work on concrete
imagery has an exercise on memories,
which is particularly effective (Appendix 1, Exercise 1).
This exercise capitalises on the natural
disposition to learn about what interests you
The exercises in the course are all heuristic in nature, but I regard reading and daily journaling to be two of the most important long-term strategies. On the first day I tell my learners that good poems are the best teachers (Koooser, 2005, p.9; Oliver, 1994, p.6). I give them a list of accessible contemporary poets to read. I also aim to give beginning poets what they need to know about what makes a good poem good. I focus on three key issues over the three days: word choice, concrete imagery, and figurative imagery. Reading models of outstanding poems is extremely important to underscore the exercises in these three key areas, so each lesson also has a handout with a couple of pages of example poems. Csikszentmihalyi (1996, p.261) found that all poets he studied had first immersed themselves in the domain of literature. As poet Anthony Hecht (cited in Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.262) says, 'In some immediate sense poetry depends on the whole poetic tradition of the past.'

Another strategy is recommended by Epstein (cited in Runco, 2007, p.348), who suggests that some of our best ideas occur when we are 'in bed, on the bus, or in the bath!' We must be ready to record them, so like him I suggest recording the fleeting image or idea for later elaboration. Csikszentmihalyi (1996, p.262) found that all the writers he studied kept diaries and notebooks. They all started working with the word, the phrase; image first, 'so as not to miss the message of the unconscious too quickly by forcing the impression into a suitable form'. I ask my students to use a journal as an ongoing place to experiment with their writing. I ask them to write every day, also encouraging what Piirto (2004, p.420) calls the core attitude of self-discipline.

**Evaluation**

Urban's (2003, p.102) componential model of creativity helped me isolate six ways of looking at my teaching program and it listed diagnostic and reflective questions to help me do that. Its main drawback in my view is that because the model focuses on personality and cognitive factors, the creative product is only implied. This is a problem because I feel the poems my students write, and their success in the publishing world, are an important part of the evaluation of my class. Space constraints confine me to a brief comment on each of the six components in Urban's model.

Divergent thinking was a central part of my class as all exercises were open-ended. Successful poems incorporate remote associations, verbal originality, fluency and flexibility. These aspects were all encouraged.

General knowledge and thinking base was a necessary part of this course. The poet must employ critical thinking skills when deciding whether the word, line, or poem itself is working. Group share, especially, modelled the kind of reflective practice necessary for a good writer.

Specific knowledge base and specific skills were central because it is crucial that poets be cognisant of their domain, which was the rationale for reading poetry. Three core poetic skills were emphasised: word choice, concrete imagery and figurative imagery.

Focusing and task commitment Students were encouraged to write every day of the week, especially in their journals. Most of the students continued to write well after the course was over, coming to the weekly poet feedback session. Karen comments, 'I looked forward every week.
to your jumpstart class. It helped me to begin writing and I have not stopped.'

**Motives and motivation** My students were motivated enough to give up three weekend mornings to come to this writing class. Some students repeated the class up to three times. I attempted to heighten their enthusiasm by removing environmental and emotional blocks to writing. Because students always had choice, and wrote about their own lives, they stayed motivated to write in and out of class. Heather had this to say, 'Janet's "Jumpstart your poetry" class did just that! After 3–4 years of writing next to nothing, suddenly I had a flow of inspiration from the ideas and exercises in the class. Not only that, I feel like I have gone in some new and exciting directions in my poetry that I never would have on my own. Thanks for re-lighting the spark and coaxing it to burn brighter than ever!'

**Openness and ambiguity** The class exercises and environment strived to excite these qualities in the students by helping them let go and experiment.

**Conclusion**

In the words of two of the participants:

Janet showed me a part of poetry I did not know existed. The exercises she had us do, and the examples she gave us just blew my mind.

I found myself listening to rhythms, sounds, beats around me. I started writing poems in my head and on paper, exploring the pure joy of words.

Clearly the course touched on the six components of the model. This may be why it was able to 'jumpstart' writing of poetry for students. Many have had work published, won competitions. One elderly woman has written and published a book of her own poems. Because it takes so much time commitment to be a writer, and because new writers need a supportive community for feedback, the addition of the weekly poet's meeting helped some students develop at a better pace than those who did not receive that time. In some ways I imagine a two-week intensive course on writing would be more of an immersion, enabling students to go more deeply more quickly, but it just is not practical in today's busy world.

**References**


Appendix 1: Sample class exercises

Exercise 1: Collage poem

Cut out 50 or so phrases, words, sentences you like from a magazine. Select some as possible titles. On a large white page, arrange these cut-outs into a collage poem, without forcing the words into a preconceived subject. You may need to change your title when you're through. The pleasure is the discovery of the poem you didn't know you were creating (adapted from Mayes 2001, p.464).

Exercise 2: First memories

Write a list of your earliest memories, including all the colours, shapes, movements, and tastes you can recall. Continue with other early memories. Do you have substance for a poem? Do you have a particularly strong memory — can you remember the pattern of your mother's dress, the smell of her cooking, the words your father sang, and the venetian blinds rattling in the wind? In your mind, go to a childhood place — put us in the day-to-day reality, give details, take us there.

To construct your poem try including a water or liquid of any kind (tears, Coke, melting ice). Mention a piece of furniture (bed, chair, TV). Use strong verbs and physical details (senses). Tell a secret and a lie (never tell which is which). Surprise yourself; tell us something you didn't know you knew.

Appendix 2: Journal jumpstarts

1. Take the first line of a poem or story and write from there. If you get stuck take lines from other poems and texts and use them along the way. Write twenty or more lines. Later you may want to revise your borrowed lines. Those lines are perhaps linked to issues that matter to you.

2. Free write for twenty minutes without lifting the pen from the paper. Write anything without logically trying to connect what you are doing. Then underline any words or lines that you like. The purpose is spontaneity.

3. Go somewhere and sit alone. Listen. Write about what is around you, using all your senses. It's important to narrow everything down, make it as specific as you can, down to the tip of the blade of grass, the turmeric stain on the table, or you will leave the reader out. For emotion to arise, writing has to be very specific, describing a particular moment or experience in a particular place. Breathe deeply. What do you smell? Look to your right. What do you see? Feel the body and the mind taking it in. Look straight up. Do you see blue sky, fluorescent, a spider in the corner? Notice colours, textures, and shapes. Look closely at something you see all the time and write as if you have never seen it before. Keep going.


5. Write a journal entry imitating the style of a poet you admire.

6. Write about earliest memories — use the phrase 'I remember' and free write using as many specific details as you can.

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