Creativity in English

A NATE Position Paper

Following the report of the Durham Commission on Creativity and Education published in October 2019, NATE presents the following Position Paper on Creativity in English, written by **Peter Thomas** in consultation with **NATE's Management Committee**.

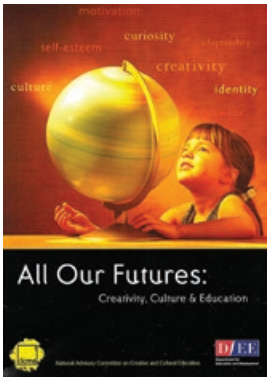
Few education professionals would deny that creativity is a Good Thing, but there is less agreement about how creativity is defined, and how nurtured – let alone how assessed. Some see creativity as the pinnacle of education, and others see it as an excuse to avoid the rigours of a knowledge discipline. A starting point is Einstein's distinction between the cognitive and the imaginative: '*Logic will get you from A to B; imagination will take you everywhere*'. A cake-and-eat-it compromise would conceive of creativity as both logical and imaginative. Such a conception would value the ability and intention to ask '*What if...?*', in '*What if everything stayed the same?*', or '*What if nothing stayed the same?*' or '*What if this or that was changed?*'. This 'what if-ness', applied to people, situations, ideas, feelings – *or* language – means ability and willingness to go beyond what, apparently, *is*. NATE's position is that English as a humane discipline puts imaginative and critical creativity at the core of its humanity and at the core of its discipline.

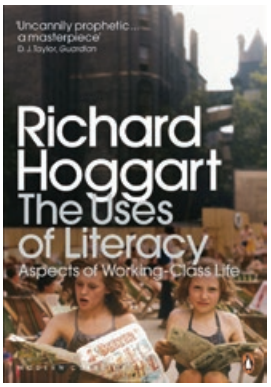
Creativity is not only a desirable outcome of a rounded, deep and lasting education, but a means towards it. It should, therefore, be firmly embedded in the English curriculum rather than added to it. Another starting point is Ken Robinson's 1995 report, *All Our Futures*, and his subsequent observation that '*we don't grow into creativity, we grow out of it. Or rather, we get educated out of it*' (TED 2006). The current vogue for Direct Instruction to instil Cultural Capital represents a compliance model of learning which may not be the best model of education for creativity, though it would be a mistake to accept a false binary here, that education must be *either* creative *or* instructional. Both have value: no single model or method suits all learners, or all learning, or all purposes of learning, all the time.

Creativity in English is most easily identified in individual inventiveness in speech or writing, which makes English a natural place for creativity to thrive. The problem with this is that speaking and writing don't necessarily display all a student's (or all students') creative thinking and feeling. Literacy has been given dominance as the medium of creativity but it may not be the medium of choice or talent for all. It may even be an inhibitor for the hesitantly or reluctantly literate. It may also (adapting Richard Hoggart's idea in *Uses of Literacy* about working-class creativity in miners' choirs and brass bands) fail to reflect creativity expressed in communal effort and design.

Literacy and creativity

Robinson's view is that '*creativity is as important as literacy and we should afford it the same status*' (TED 2006). NATE endorses this emphasis but suggests a flexible linkage whereby literacy (or literacies) will be the functional core of English, but creativity will be one of its main purposes. This has implications for writing in English: much of what youngsters write is for the purpose of being assessed for literacy conformity and accuracy, mainly patterns of spelling and grammar. Whilst recognition of these patterns is important in becoming familiar with print, the patterns themselves are inconsistent, and subject to casual or deliberate avoidance or manipulation. A current emphasis on teaching reading by identifying patterns of phoneme-grapheme correspondence (synthetic phonics) relies on using texts conforming to these regularities, and of decoding 'words' invented to display them. Whilst Ofsted and the DfE affirm that this is the most effective practice in establishing early literacy, it is not enough to make *decoding* a synonym for *reading* – certainly not creative reading.





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Creative reading and writing

Reading involves an active and dynamic relationship with text, and a range of personal, emotional, contextual and wilful responses to meanings embedded in language. Creative – interactive – reading goes beyond extracting literal meaning from information texts. Some writing prompts reader delight and stimulus in conscious deviations or manipulations of lexis and grammar.

Consider, for example: '*Time flies like an arrow: fruit flies like a banana*', or a sub-editor's wicked wit in the caption to a photo of Cyfartha Castle Great Hall: '*This is where the Lord Mayor of Cardiff holds his balls and dances*'.

Dr Johnson, who knew a bit about English, defined two kinds of literary excellence: the ability to make the new seem familiar and the ability to make the familiar seem new. English teachers favoured with pages of boys' intergalactic fantasies in the constellation Glarg may think the latter of these more useful in developing a creative writing discipline. As an example of a writer creating something major from something familiar, even an atheist can admire GM Hopkins' use of an ember's fall through a grate and burst into flame as an emblem of resurrection in '*blue-bleak embers ... fall, gall themselves and gash gold-vermilion*'.

NATE's view is that creativity in English may sometimes be displayed in a devious, playful, subversive exploitation of irregularity and non-conformity – in language and in attitude. Much of the pleasure of reading fiction comes from recognising implicit rather than explicit meaning, and leads to a sophisticated grasp of irony, or structural and attitudinal intent in parody. Some literary texts work by demanding this kind of creative reading. As long ago as 1988, Margaret Meek, in *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn*, demonstrated how meaning owes more to pragmatics than semantics when discussing Jan Mark's children's story 'William's Version':

> '*Sing to me*', *said William.*
>
> '*Granny's too old to sing*', *said Granny.*
>
> '*I'll sing to you, then*' *said William. William only knew one song He had forgotten the words and the tune but he sang it several times, anyway.*
>
> '*Shall we do something else now?*' *said Granny.*

Granny's attitude to looking after William, his attitude in singing, and Granny's response to his singing are not conveyed by semantic freighting of the words used: the meaning is less in the words to be decoded than in the implied context of situation and relationship.

Whilst these matters of conformity and accuracy have use and status in many parts of education, life and work, they are different from the criteria by which writing may be judged to show creativity. This is not to say that creativity is a licence for abandoning or ignoring literacy conventions, but that some writing needs to be valued for what it has to say, for its qualities of thought and feeling. The youngster who responds to the task 'Write three words which describe yourself' with '*I am a rebel*' has done more than can be usefully assessed for conventional literacy. It is part of creativity to consciously subvert or defy convention as in Michael Gove's non-standard choice of: '*There ain't gonna be no second referendum.*'

English needs to allow space and value for writing that has emotional, intellectual or experiential integrity even if it lacks compliance with publication norms. A recent article in *Teaching English* ('Hand, Head, Heart and Voice', by Helen Mars) illustrated creative reading and writing with disciplines of empathy and reflection, using Agard, Thunberg, Watson and Luther King as models. The need for creative writing space and value is greater since the demise of A Level Creative Writing which was, briefly, a potent emblem of its importance and continuity.

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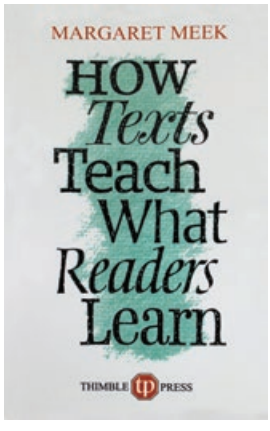


Drama in English

The promotion of STEM has eroded Drama and Art, let alone Dance, within the curriculum, removing a platform for non-literate – visual, aural and physical – creativity. There is some scope for including the Arts under an English umbrella. In any case, much of the creativity of the Arts is wrapped up in performance, and the scope for performance within day-to-day classroom English is limited. However, if English is, broadly, a curriculum for communicating, and communicating for the 21st century, it needs to embrace forms of communication other than those of the scribe or orator. Hence English needs to allow space for Drama – not just Drama as performance, but Drama as process. Drama within English is a medium for presenting, exploring, resisting or celebrating thoughts, feelings and experiences that matter to the communicator, and matter enough to be presented to others.

Restricting the communication of feelings and ideas to writing excludes those who, by ability or preference, may be physically or vocally expressive. All students can gain from a wider communicative repertoire. Those least at ease with written communication can be extended in their personal and social skills by prompting vocal and physical means of expression, in public performance or not. Those already at ease with spoken and written communication can gain in social confidence from adding the dramatic to the literate.

In English, there is daily scope for creative activity springing from texts and from students' own experience: improvising scenarios based on anticipation of a play's or a novel's next development, or presenting alternative interpretations of characters' motives, thoughts or feelings can replace (or prepare for) more formally communicated responses. Mime, tableau, hot-seating and freeze-frame activities can secure knowledge of plot or highlight significant moments in a character's development. Simple drama techniques enable the links that human beings enjoy in learning, doing and communicating through play.

Oracy in English

Oracy, as in the activities above, is not only a communicative medium, but a skill for crafted development. As such, its immediacy and fluidity are assets in motivating students who are intimidated by print or writing, and a way of exploring or testing, possibilities of meaning which may eventually achieve more permanent form in writing, or not. What matters is that oracy provides scope for agency which may not be confidently available in writing. Oracy does not always need to result in a finished product. Process oracy is a matter of thinking aloud – something valued beyond education in therapy, thinking and debate. Most adult English users, – including academics and professionals – will argue, persuade, inform, tell jokes and stories orally, and successfully, independent of literacy norms.

In this sense, developing confidence in oracy as equipment for life is more important than the kind of oracy associated with Public Speaking. The foundations for building an oracy curriculum were well laid in 1993 by the National Oracy Project, and the work of Neil Mercer at Cambridge has provided illustrations of ways in which talk links with thinking. More recently, Deborah Jones has made the case for oracy in the junior school, with most of her points equally relevant to the secondary school. Currently, School 21 demonstrates the

beauty, utility and application of oracy in teaching and learning. There is more than enough here to support a principled and creative speaking and listening strand in English, particularly since its status in GCSE English has diminished.

Individual creativity is sometimes evident in out-of-school activity, and may be increasingly so as the curriculum becomes increasingly locked into rehearsal of assessment objectives and examination protocols. It may be spring-boarded off a video-games platform, or a club or sports team, and seem unconnected with English, but creative processes beyond English can be avenues to English, or English avenues to them. Creative teaching starts by valuing what students bring with them as much as by making subject content appealing and relevant. English's traditional appeal to students of all abilities was its readiness to accept a wider distribution and valuing of cultural capital.

Creativity beyond School English

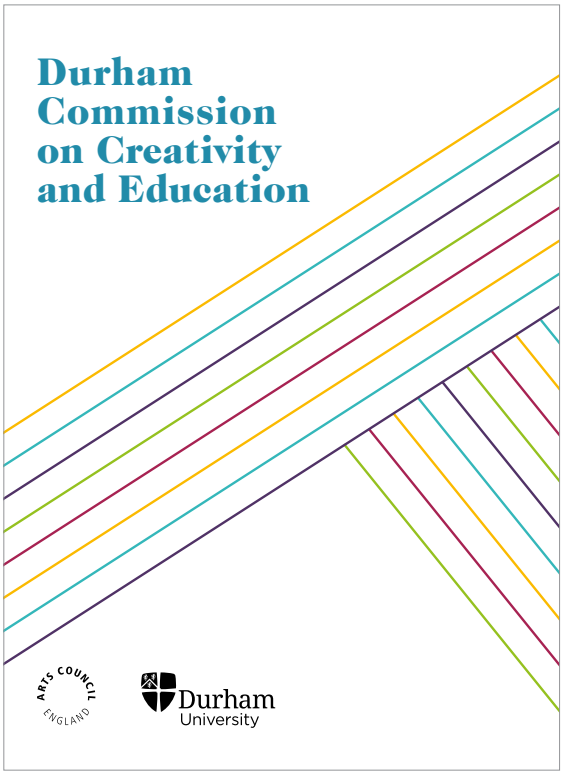
The CBI has made clear that it values creativity more than other attributes, so there is a practical dimension to the creativity agenda. Employability requires skills of communication, co-operation as well as initiative and independence. The days of English preparation for work as learning to write an application letter are long gone: English needs to be engaged with and stimulating attitudes and values, aptitudes and capacities – some of which go beyond conventional definitions of literacy. Simon Wrigley (National Writing Project) has spoken aptly of a need for 'Lateracy' to complement the traditional concerns of the English curriculum.

Employability is enhanced by the ability to adapt a model or process new needs, or invent new models or processes. These have more occupational value than identifying a fronted adverbial or using a semi-colon. Students who may not be engaged by creative writing directed towards a story may be more motivated by a simulated or real task engaging with the world beyond self and school, such as designing an advert or a campaign for a product or issue, or creating a questionnaire for a survey and report. The inclusion of such Media Studies texts and tasks would provide scope for creativity relevant to communication beyond school.

Finally...

NATE's aim is to revise some of the assumptions governing the purpose and nature of teaching and learning in English and to make them meet the needs of all students and of life in the twenty-first century. This requires some refocusing on other than current assessment priorities to revive English as a creative and critical humane discipline.

This aim is supported by the work recently published (2019) by the University of Durham Commission on Creativity, with which NATE finds common cause and some close agreement. The report matches NATE's view of English as a humane discipline for the 21st century, embracing more than the assessment imperatives and protocols of KS2 and KS4. NATE proposes English as a structured experience developing perceptual and communicative skills in relation to aesthetic, moral, emotional, functional, personal and social aspects of work, leisure and citizenship. This view has informed other recent NATE publications, and its ongoing collaboration with the Ideas Foundation.



The way forward

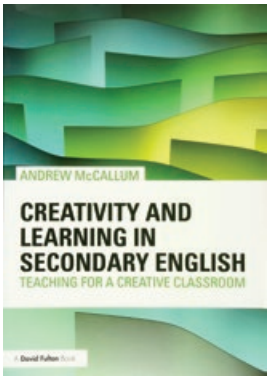
1. NATE proposes a creative collaboration with others (e.g. The Ideas Foundation, DDC, EA, NLT, UKLA and EMC) to promote the creativity agenda via publication and/or conference in the coming year. It would be good to have DfE support and funding, provided that it is clear that a creativity agenda needs the expertise of academics and professionals, rather than being part of a short-term political expedient.

2. Public examinations, especially GCSE, are unlikely to build a creativity assessment objective into mark-schemes, so there is a need for some stand-alone or supplementary component, possibly modelled on the Creative Writing A Level. The assessment of creativity is problematic, but for creativity to gain the status of an assessed skill (accepting curriculum realities) criteria for distinguishing creativity from receptivity, memory, comprehension and factual knowledge need to be developed. NATE and partners should explore such creativity descriptors in reading, writing, talking, thinking and feeling. These are likely to include interrogation, adaptation, extrapolation and re-modelling, demonstrating where English has a distinctive set of skills to be developed alongside its knowledge content.

3. Whilst most English teachers would agree that creativity matters, and that English needs to be engaging to students and relevant to 21st century work, leisure and citizenship, it would help if English teachers link their work to whole school curriculum, backed by the Head and SMT. NATE would like to support and celebrate any such initiative, and invites English teachers to report on their school's creativity in action to create a case file for publication.

Recommended further reading:

Andrew McCallum: *Creativity and Learning in Secondary English*, 2012: Routledge



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