

Conversations in Creativity

Introduction

- One of my current areas of research is the impact of the current NC (DfE, 2014) on creativity in secondary English in England
- The text below was inspired by the work of Newbolt (1921)¹, Bullock (1975)² and Cox³ (1989), all of whom consulted experts within the profession as they drew up their respective reports on the teaching of English. These included teachers in schools (from Heads of Department to NQTs), teacher trainers, academics, examiners, etc.; plus written testimony from many others. The (unknown) authors of the current NC chose not to consult with experts (Wintour, 2012)⁴. I sought the views of those they *might* have spoken to had they followed the lead of their predecessors.
- I conducted individual interviews with 12 experts (using definitions from the literature on English and creativity as prompts), then wove their words into a script.

Task

- Write your own definition of 'creativity' in one or two sentences. You can share your definition in the Zoom chat or keep it private for now. (2 minutes)

Breakout task (groups of 5)

- Introduce yourselves to each other! Offer your name, your school, where you are based.
- Briefly share your definitions of 'creativity.' (2 minutes)
- Scan the cast list (see following page) and cast the script. *I recommend that each participant takes two parts: Anne and Gary; Jill and Judy; Jack and Tony; Leon and Ruth; Sara and Tony.*
- Read through the script. (approx. 7 minutes)
- Discuss - to what extent was your definition of creativity confirmed through the reading of the script? Do you want to revise your definition? Is there anything in the script that you take issue with? (3 minutes)

Plenary

- Invite feedback from one or two groups – to what extent did the script confirm/reflect/echo or run counter to your own definition of creativity?
- What bearing does this have on your conception of English? And of education? Share your thoughts in the chat if you would like to.
- See Taking this approach into the classroom below for suggestions on how creating a 'found' script can be adapted for use with your students.

¹ Newbolt, J.H. (1921/1934) *The Teaching of English in England (being the Report of the Departmental Committee Appointed by the President of the Board of Education to Inquire into the Position of English in the Educational System of England)* London: HMSO

² Bullock, A. (1975) *A Language for Life: Report of the Committee of Enquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science under the Chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock F.B.A.* London: HMSO

³ Cox, B. (1989) *English for ages 5 to 16: Proposals of the Secretary of State for Education and Science and the Secretary of State for Wales* London: Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office

⁴ Wintour, P. (2012) *Michael Gove accused of major gaps in draft national curriculum for English* in: *The Guardian* 31.10.12 Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/oct/31/michael-gove-draft-national-curriculum> [last accessed 14.09.19]

Cast (in alphabetical order), with their roles at the time of interview. Names are pseudonyms.

- Anne Teacher of English running a PGCE part-time with a School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) consortium; in charge of recently- and newly-qualified teachers in her school.
- Gary Headteacher of a successful rural comprehensive school (Ofsted: 'Good'; Arts Council Platinum Artsmark Award). Regularly publishes opinion pieces on education policy in the national press and national education press.
- Gill Senior Lecturer in Education; English PGCE programme lead at a top Russell Group university; former Head of English.
- Jack Active emeritus member of International Centre for Historical Research in Education, Institute of Education; founder member of London English Research group.
- Judy Senior Lecturer in Education; English PGCE programme lead at a post-1992 university, with experience in the Graduate Teacher Training Programme (GTTP), SCITT and School Direct PGCE programmes; former Head of English in inner city school.
- Leon Visiting Lecturer and Research Associate at a Russell-Group university. Former Head of English and Deputy Head in a London school.
- Paul Teaching and Learning Coordinator of Literacy Across the Curriculum in a SW school, having stepped down as Head of English. Active member of a Teachers as Writers group.
- Ruth Recently-qualified teacher of English in an 11-18 rural maintained comprehensive, judged Outstanding by Ofsted and awarded Gold Artsmark Award.
- Sara Raising Standards Lead in English in a city academy, judged Good by Ofsted, having begun her career in a neighbouring city academy. Active member of a Teachers as Writers group.
- Tony Former Teacher of English in Zambia, Singapore and England. Published poet; previously involved in Creative Partnerships.

Setting:

The cast is seated comfortably in a loose semi-circle around three coffee tables on which the coloured cards with selected quotations about creativity are scattered. Cafetieres and coffee cups, water carafes and glasses are dotted around. The group appear earnest, engaged and absorbed.

We join the discussion as they consider what it means to be 'educated in English'⁵ and whether this has a bearing on how they understand the relationship between English and creativity.

⁵ Does "being educated in English"... imply knowledge of grammar and syntax? Competence at 'literary criticism' (and what is this anyway?)? Ability to produce 'creative writing' (another obscurity)? Knowledge of the dates of authors and the dimensions of the Shakespearean stage? in: Wilson, J (1972) *Philosophy and Educational Research*: National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales, p.9

Scene:

Anne I suppose the problem is that being educated in English means different things to different people. If you are David, who's just joined my Year 9 class from Hungary, being educated in English is being able to have conversations with peers. He doesn't understand most of what's going on in class, but he can tell me the witches in Macbeth are *deus ex machina* because we've been over and over it, so in that sense he is quite educated in English. But being educated in English doesn't stop on that August day when the results come out. I have a degree in English. Does that mean I'm educated in English? Yes and no. (*She shrugs*)

Gill Exactly. English is multi-layered, multi-disciplinary. It's about seeing *connections* between those different aspects of the subject.

Jack (*Chiming in, animated*) Yes! Connections that might come from expressive talk ...

Judy (*Also enthusiastic, she picks up immediately*) ... or through reading a shared bit of text. Or through the making of a text.

Jack Exactly. Reading, writing and talking are all aspects of the same process. The unitary view of English.

Anne And in terms of 'creative writing', well, some students are really good at analysis but can't write creatively at all, and that doesn't mean they are not educated in English.

Tony But creativity in English is not just about 'creative' writing. It's not just 'wow' words writ large. It's the whole range of writing, from poetry to TV scripts to journalism, whatever. So it might be a notice that's going out to parents, which is as dismal as you can get, but it's still got to be created.

Gill Yes – *all* writing should be seen as creative writing.

Pause

In some ways I guess the word 'creativity' is slightly problematic. Could you teach English creatively if you didn't reflect on *why* it was creative, whatever your definition of creative might be?

Jack Well, I could simply open my OED and find 'creativity', but the key question is, what do people mean by it? What's their agenda? What's being contested? Whose armies are being assembled? And why?

Judy I don't much like the military metaphor, but those are interesting questions. But creativity's also to do with *creating*, which I think people lose sight of when they think of the word *creative*. You are in the process of *moulding* something; you are in the process of *building*; taking on new ways of looking. And that needs time and space.

Leon For me, creativity is more about cognition. It's to do with *flexibility* and having an imaginative response. One doesn't sit down and think, 'I'll learn this for the exam.' That's useless. It's considering, what sense do I make of it? How do I relate it to my own life? And the lives of those around me? All those are elements of creativity.

Sara Totally! I think that when we talk about creativity in schools, people often think in terms of the Arts, but actually creativity is *thinking*...

(the speakers almost overlap each other in their enthusiasm)

Leon ... and using inference, deduction, comparison

Gary ... and solving problems

Paul ... and making decisions.

Anne It's about *discovery*.

Pause.

But also understanding that you can't always make sense of everything.

They smile in recognition of a shared understanding.

Leon All those mental activities we've just mentioned underpin creativity.

Paul Yes, but for me, it goes beyond developing the intellectual or the academic. There's a spiritual element too. I was talking to my A level students yesterday about creativity – it's our life blood. Without it, people feel purposeless, despondent, and their life is just meaningless. Especially in a secular society most of us inhabit.

Sara I agree. I think being educated in English is about being educated within your soul. It's about empathy and understanding of the human experience. I wouldn't be teaching English now if I didn't get that.

Paul Creativity is what makes life worth living. Without it I would feel there was something missing. It's brought meaning to my life.

Pause.

- Judy And mine. Creativity is the living of English: the chance for teachers and students to feel a completeness, an excitement about living in the moment.
- Ruth (*Enters the discussion tentatively*) So yes, it's all these things; and it's about enjoyment.
- Yet the last thing I'd want is for one of my students to be really passionate about a topic but not be able to express it. So creativity is also what we're doing now: it's about communicating with other people.
- Anne Even if they are on the same topic but have totally different views! So yes, I'd say it's about collaboration.
- Judy *Leaning over to pick up the card with the Summerfield quotation, which she reads aloud:*
- "Creative English" ... will involve us in talk about our selves (sic), our language, our behaviour, our attitudes and beliefs.⁶*
- Look. When I read this, the word 'our' jumped out at me: 'Talking about *our* selves, *our* language, *our* behaviour.' That pronoun conveys the notion of *community*.
- Sara (*Nodding*) So that suggests creative English is about making yourself a better person *and* a more responsible member of *society*.
- Paul I'd go further. To really move forward as an individual *and* to move forward as a society you need to use creativity as a *starting point*.
- Judy That's interesting – it may be the starting point, but it's also about the end result. We haven't yet mentioned the idea of creativity as a product-driven notion. Just like in *All Our Futures*:
- 'Creativity is imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value.'⁷*
- Tony True, the outcome is important, it's not *all* in the process, no (*chuckles*). An outcome is important, because you want to know it's real rather than just (*comic voice*) 'We're messing around here'.

⁶ Summerfield, G (ed) (1968) *Creativity in English: Papers relating to the Anglo-American seminar on the teaching of English (Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, 1966): The Dartmouth Seminar Papers* Champaign, Illinois: NCTE p.44

⁷ NACCCE (1999) *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*

<https://www.creativitycultureeducation.org/publication/all-our-futures-creativity-culture-and-education/> p.30

- Judy Perhaps. But maybe 'outcomes' aren't always tangible? You might live in the creative moment through shared reading or through talking; or just being together in a safe space and being able to suggest new things.
- Tony Of course. But another outcome of creativity is new knowledge. I worked in Singapore for a while. They realised there that a curriculum based on 'rote learn it, repeat it' resulted in only being able to repeat what they already knew. They realised they needed to be more creative to grow in knowledge.
- Leon And they were right. But why the focus on novelty? People seem to think that creativity is having bright ideas and thinking of new things, but that's extremely rare. Anyone you think about – any painter of the past, any poet of the past you think was brilliant - has built on the work of his or her predecessors. So, I'd say creativity is about *development*. I think that originality is *not* the most important thing.
- Gill But actually, surely a notion of originality *is* helpful in terms of education. It's not got to be original for the whole world, it's just got to be original to the person generating it.
- Pause*
- Jack Perhaps the important thing is not to *define* creativity, but to see what work creativity does. How it organises socio-political commitments and educational understandings.
- Anne Education is about opening doors! Remember what Gibb said? 'Education is the engine of our economy.'⁸ Education *should* prepare students for work, of course - whether they become a poet or go and work for a FSTE 100 company - but it's not all of it.
- Paul The emphasis is the wrong way round. The *by-product* of having creative, educated children who have a thirst for information and a thirst for knowledge is a more successful society and a more successful economy.
- Sara Yeah: there's an argument to be made for education for education's sake. We shouldn't just be saying to students, 'This is what you need for the world of work.' Education serves a purpose beyond just creating worker drones.
- Paul (*Nodding vigorously*) Forget getting a good job and a wage and a house and all the other things that are held out as carrots to students. What about seeing the world in all its colours

⁸ Gibb, N (2015) The Purpose of Education (Speech to the Education Reform Summit)
<https://www.nickgibb.org.uk/news/purpose-education> n.p.

and variation; and understanding when people are lying and when they're telling you the truth? What about being able to read sincerity in a friend?

He looks around the circle expressively.

These are the things that for me education is about. And it's about enabling everyone to take a full and active part in society. And stopping society attacking itself and others.

Sara A lot of people feel quite disenfranchised right now. But creative education can change society. It really can help people feel they're not disenfranchised any more.

Taking this approach into the classroom

The script above was written through combining extracts from ten separate conversations. The process worked because the conversations were thematically linked.

The same principle can be effective in developing students' close reading skills, (creative) writing skills and confidence in discussion. The task is for students to create a scripted conversation between individuals – dead or alive, real or fictional, contemporary or historical. (It might be a very effective means of introducing students to C19th fiction and non-fiction.) The key point is that these people have never actually met each other (or, at least, there is no written record of their conversation).

The activity is suitable for any key stage, depending on your choice of stimulus material. It works well with lower attainers who are reluctant to put pen to paper, since the words are already supplied; it is great for learners new to English because the sentences are pre-formed; at the same time, it stretches high attainers as they seek to capitalise on subtle differences in perspective and create a realistic script.

Depending on the choice of topic, type of texts and length of texts, the process could take as few as 3 lessons, or be developed into a full scheme of work.

Resources:

You will need a selection of texts (speeches, letters, opinion pieces, etc.) on the same topic. Choose texts which present diverse views. Two or three texts are a good starting point as students get the hang of it; high-attaining students will be able to work with several more.

Approach:

1. Get students to read the first text carefully. Identify the writer's point of view; highlight their key points and perspectives.
2. Read the next (and subsequent) texts, repeating the process. Begin to identify the similarities and differences between the viewpoints.
3. Now encourage students to imagine that the writers are brought together in the same space and are having a conversation (or an argument!). A good tip is to choose a controversial statement with which to open, as this will encourage the debate. Then get them to begin to write down (or copy and paste, if they are working on laptops; or physically cut and paste if you have enough scissors and glue) the key arguments, not forgetting the speaker's names, to create the outline of a script.
4. Finally, hone the script to make it sound as realistic as possible. Depending on the level of challenge you wish to set your class, you can allow them to include more or fewer of their own words to help knit the textual extracts together and develop the rhetoric.
5. If time and space allows – perform them! Students will then be able to contribute their own ideas to the discussion, informed by the viewpoints they have taken from the activity.

Suggested topics and characters:

1. *What's the best way to save the polar bears?* A conversation between Charles Darwin, Sarah Palin and Greta Thunberg

Suitable texts can be found at:

Charles Darwin: <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/> (This is a fabulously rich archive, including letters Darwin exchanged with notable people of his day, including George Eliot and Alexander von Humboldt.

Sarah Palin: https://www.democracynow.org/2008/9/17/sarah_palin_and_global_warming_alaska

Greta Thunberg: <https://greta.heath3.com/> (This site contains both video footage and full transcripts.)

2. *How can we combat gender inequality in sport?* A conversation between Vera Pauw (leading Dutch trainer of women's football), Jessica Ennis-Hill, Billie Jean King

Suitable texts can be found at:

Vera Pauw: <https://www.the42.ie/vera-pauw-feature-2-5237336-Oct2020/>

Jessica Ennis Hill: <https://www.skysports.com/more-sports/athletics/news/29175/11707779/jessica-ennis-hill-addresses-gender-imbalance-in-sport>

Billie Jean King: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/12/billie-jean-king-tennis-equality-battle-of-the-sexes>

3. *What are the key qualities of a nurse?* A conversation between Florence Nightingale, Mary Seacole, Edith Cavell and Ruth May (England's Chief Nurse)

Suitable texts can be found at:

Florence Nightingale: <http://archives.bu.edu/web/florence-nightingale>

Mary Seacole: <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/seacole/adventures/adventures.html>

Edith Cavell: <https://edithcavell.org.uk/edith-cavell-in-her-own-words/>

Ruth May: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/nursingmidwifery/chief-nursing-officer-for-england/>