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Teaching the Essential Understanding of Creative Writing

Abstract

In my Master´s thesis I have researched teaching of creative writing for high school students. I have also created the concept called *the Essential Understanding of Creative Writing,* which I think is the base and the starting point of teaching creative writing. The term is hypothesis and it roughly means the subjectively understood essence of creative work and writing process, as well as the strengthening the inner motivation and author identity by writer. Collaboration seems to support *the Essential Understanding of Creative Writing.* That is why I have designed the teaching material using collaborative methods like role play and e-learning.

1. How the Essential Understanding of Creative Writing could be described?

When teaching creative writing at High School I have noticed that it is not effective to teach fiction writing by narrative and literature concepts, text structure or genres if the student does not understand the operative environment of creative writing. And if the student has no understanding of the essence of creative writing and the process, the whole procedure may seem to be a chaotic action without a change to control it. I would call that understanding *the Essential Understanding of Creative Writing* and I have made a hypothetical list to describe it. I have founded the following points while researching some theories of creativity and writing (Sharples 1998, Flower 1989, Csíkszentmihályin2005, Uusikylä 2002). The hypotheses are reflecting the student who has embraced *the Essential Understanding of Creative Writing.*

1. The student understands that creative writing is being in the cyclic, creative process conducted by restrictions.

2. The student dares to throw himself into the creative writing process, which also demands the breaking the limits of writing subject himself.

3. The student has achieved a flow experience, which becomes an inner motivator and prize of the writer.

4. The student takes text as un autonomous object isolated of his own personality.

5. The student is able to evaluate his own text and he does not write only for external authorities.

The Essential Understanding of Creative Writing described by the epithets above could be the starting point of teaching creative writing.

Level 3.

genre and style

Level 2.

grammar, structure and literature concepts

Level 1.
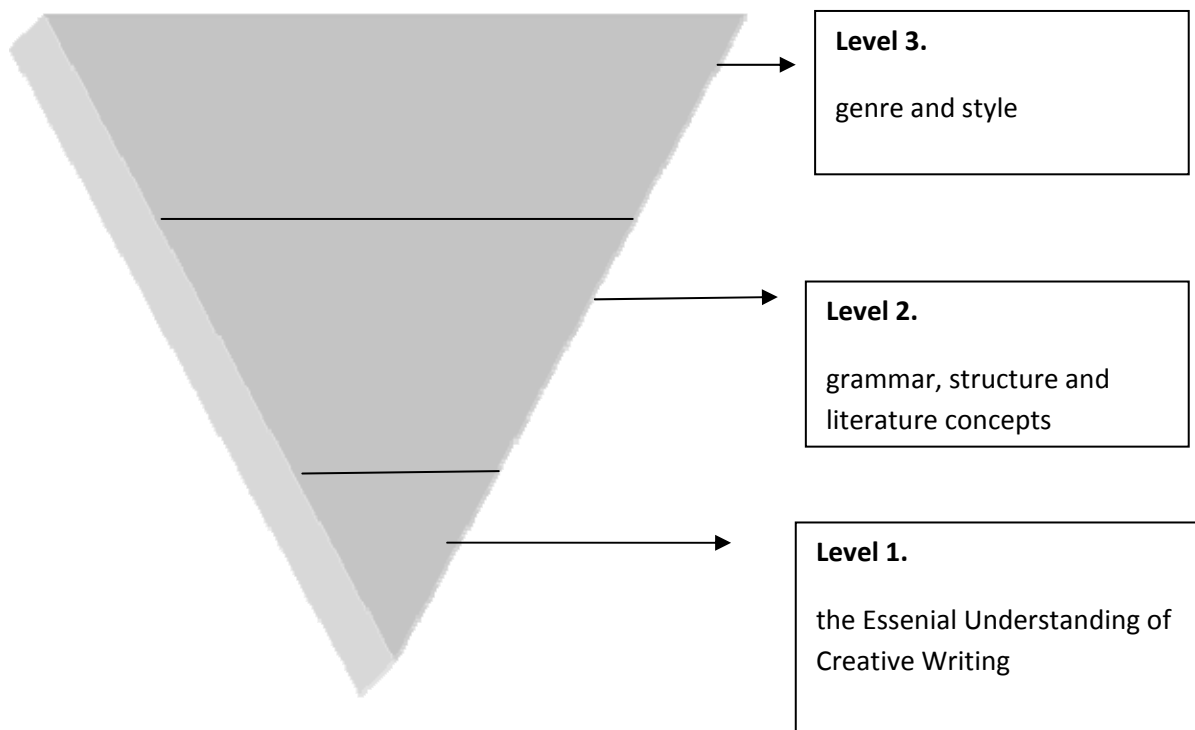
the Essenial Understanding of Creative Writing

Figure 1.

The basic components of the creative writing skill (Kallionpää 2009,8).

The e-learning course I have designed is focused on the level 1. After the first-level handling the

student is more capable to develop the skills in the upper levels. Without the proper handling of level 1 the writer might be locked by his critical ego, he feels helpless without any control in his writing process and he lets external authorities to define himself through his text. It is also possible that he considers writing as ego-threatening action, which should be avoided. At that point the progression to the upper levels is completely inhibited.

2.The Essential Understanding of Creative Writing from the theoretical perspective

Understanding one's writing process as the basis of writing is emphasized by Linda Flower in her book *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writers.* If one wants to improve the skills of writing, it is essential to internalize how writing occurs and essence of writing (Sharples 1999, 12). This means that teaching creative writing for students one should be led to internalize writing and creativity personally rather than beginning the studies from the rules of writing. Creative writing – indeed – consist of creativity and writing!
Kari Uusikylä announces in a positive way that creativity can also be taught and the school system has the ability to influence on the ways of emerging creativity (Uusikylä 2002, 50).

At the next chapter I am processing my hypothesis in general from the theoretical point of view.

2. 1. The student understands that creative writing is being in the cyclic, creative process conducted by restrictions.

According to Nora Värre (2001) writing process is one of the milestones in teaching writing and only observing one's process gives the opportunity to improve one's working methods (Värre 2001, 150). The cyclical process essence of writing can be demonstrated by a Journey metaphor (Sharples 1999, 42). Mike Sharples describes writing as a creative planning process. When the process of creative writing in begun by a subject, he steps literally into a creative process where the journey continues using its own logic. The journey goes on step by step without settled preplanning. Sharples announces that the plan of writing is without doubt more flexible than in most other creative action (Sharples 1999, 74).

The progress of writing process is guided by different limitations. Sharples sees these limitations as positive ways of targeting writer's attention and routing his mental resources (Sharples 1999, 6). As a constant making of choices, it is only positive that the limitations (topic, genre, context, language etc.) reduce the number of choices to be made. The writing process itself produces new limitations constantly because one has to edit and brainwork texts written earlier. These limitations help the writer to navigate in his process. The writer should have the awareness of taking the advantage of his limitations. By doing that one should avoid the entropy of awareness which distracts and makes one's mental energy inefficient. According to Csikszentmihályin this leads into a confliction which changes one's flow experience into a counter experience, i.e. entropy (Csikszentmihályin 2005, 64).

The nature of writing process includes occasional difficulties. Due to that a writer should learn ways in order to continue writing despite of difficulties. Linda Flower (1989, 10) sees these ways as problem solving strategies of writing, of which should exist several for every writer in different stages of writing.
In my opinion it is essential that a writer is capable of approving slow stages as an element that includes in the writing process. By doing that one does not interrupt his writing as the first difficulties occur, but believes that the stage of creativity will come back.

2.2 . The student dares to throw himself into the creative writing process, which also demands the breaking the limits of writing subject himself.

By throwing yourself into the process of creative writing is a leap to unknown, which demands trust and courage. Csíkszentmihályin has said that creative process whre your aim is at a *flow* experience on demands a full commitment and concentration on the task. A teacher teaching creative writing has a difficult challenge; how is it possible to encourage the students to jump in to the flow of creativity? It is not possible to throw anyone there by the teacher, one has to make his own leap.
According to Kari Uusikylä it is possible that a teacher can help a student by creating a free and encouraging atmosphere where a fair critical evaluation does not exist (Uusikylää 2002, 50-52)

A creative person can be identified from receding trivial ways of thinking and breaking one's own

subjective boundaries (Uusikylä 2002, 45).

Although one could break the boundaries of one's own ego with the help of playing for a moment, experiencing *flow* can be impossible for the reason of self-monitoring and egocentric behaviour. According to Csikszentmihalyin, a person who is aware of himself is not capable of controlling his mental energy well enough in order to experience *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 2005, 132).

The theory of subject-centered play is disproved also by Gadamer. He proves how detaching from the subject is such an essential part of playfulness (Gadamer 2005, 50-55).

According to Niemi-Pynttäri a writer that writes not only expresses himself but he can also represent something that is not part of him (Niemi-Pynttäri 2007,49).

When a person loses the feeling of being a separate "self-being", separating from the surrounding world, he experiences merging into all of being. Forgetting oneself is strongly supported by collective activity, where the common goal is known. As a paradox, after losing your "self-being" in the f*low* a person feels his identity strengthened. By doing that *flow* also construct a stronger identity (Csíkszentmihályin 2005, 100-105).

This has to be taken into consideration when a group of students consist of young people constructing their own identity. How is it possible to increase playfulness to help breaking boundaries in creative writing? As plays equate easily with games I would strongly present role playing as a possibility of strengthening playfulness. According to Kaisa Ikonen the playfulness of role playing is one of the most important reasons for its popularity (Ikonen 2008, 23).

2.3 The student have achieved a flow experience, which becomes an inner motivator and prize of the writer.

A behavior that has internal motivation occurs only from the joy and satisfaction of the doing itself. When an individual has on internal motivation he seeks this activity voluntarily, without any expetations of prices or sanctions (Byman 2002, 28).

According to Mike Sharples most of the professional writers have an internal motivation purely because of the pleasure given by the writing process, not because of output itself (Sharples 1999, 125).

Therefore the writing itself creates a *flow* experience which helps the writers to go on with their work.

A net-based communal teaching can be planned in a way that the the terms of experiencing flow can be fulfilled at an individual level. It also helps the student experience writing as a pleasent experience and also giving internal motivation in writing.

The problem in school teaching is that one's motivation if very often guided by external motivation, i.e. grades from courses. According to Metsämuuronen (1995) external motivation can weaken internal motivation. On the other hand in an ideal situation activity encouraged by an external motivation, can raise one's interest and turn into an internal motivation (Metsämuuronen 1995, 10-12).

2.4. The student takes text as un autonomous object isolated of his own personality.

Arto Haapala has studied the existential of creativity through Heidegger's art philosophy by the fact that it binds the artist and the piece of art up. Haapala thinks that an artist's pieces of art construct the identity of the artist and being an artist is being a object of evaluation (Haapala 2000,140.) It is the artistic identity of an artist that is an object of the evaluation (Haapala 2000, 149). In every day life this is obviously impossible to separate from the whole identity of an artist.

I don't want to question Haapala's thinking as subject-centered but I support it as sort of a law of art world. In my opinion it is rather cruel and non-motivating if a beginning artist – a young creative writer at this point – is being bound up from his identity and piece of art.

Therefore I definitely would like to see a young writer to develop, motivate and study without the threat that his identity could be defined by his fumbling writings.

I would begin with such text-centered thinking where the attention itself would concentrated into text itself, instead of the writer or what the text tells about its writer.

I believe when a writer learns to deal his texts as separate objects from his identity during his writing process, it is much easier to create writings that break boundaries and shape the outputs. When it comes to beginners I wouldn't emphasize the quality of the texts produced in common. I would prefer to see each writer connecting into communal writing process. I believe the as a result of rewarding and social

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writing process experience, a writer is internally more motivated to continue creative writing than after a teaching experience concentrating only on the quality of the texts.

It is still possible to dismantle the pressure of valuating communal writing.

Roland Barthes's famous phrase *"The born of the book, The dead of the Author"* could be interpreted in this case that although the individual writer in communal writing is dead, an greater concept has replaced it: a communal activation using creative energy.

2.5.The student is able to evaluate his own text and he does not write only for external authorities.

It is important for a writer to learn to evaluate his writings and also to act as his own critic. According to Flower this is the feature that separates experienced and good writers from beginners.

Unless the writer learns to act as his own critic, he constantly writes for a real or imaginary external authority. In that case self-motivated development as a writer is impossible. (Flower 1989, 214-215.) Despite that Flower doesn't mention the meaning of peer feedback, I believe that with help of the support from the group and by activating in the group it is possible to move away from one's own text and to develop evaluation skills. A writer who purely writes alone often becomes "blind" for his own text and without the possibility of reflecting one's text it is difficult to develop as a writer. According to Sharples (1994) it would also be useful to learn to see the text simultaneously from the writer's and the reader's point of view. On the other hand Sharples admits that this is extremely hard especially for young writers:

"This self-revelation can often be the most pleasurable part of
adult writing, but because it involves reflection and metacognition,
it is not easy to explain young writers (Sharples 1999, 104)."

In collaborative activation and social dialogue the writer is a subject and reader at the same time which allows the training of Sharples' perspective. For example when creating a serial story it is necessary to read carefully the earlier text and reflect it constantly with the own text. This gives the possibility of observing one's writing from supposed other's point of view.

Conclusion

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In my work I have tried to present and justify the assumption that when teaching creative writing it would be a good idea to lead the student into the nature of creative activity and writing process. It is also important to strengthen students internal motivation and writer identity. The hypothesis could be even wider with the theoretical arguments. I wanted to emphasize the major aspects, the understanding of which could help my study group students according to my experience. This also helps students who have not – for some reason or other – found the world of creative writing yet.

I still want to underline the empiric study considering creative writing is only at its beginning. I have used the net-based course in high school teaching in a testing way. Any conclusions cannot be made from the initial observations

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