

SPARKING OFF IDEAS FOR CREATIVE WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Many students, particularly those from Asian countries, find writing tedious and unpleasant. They find it difficult to get ideas that can spur them to write. Most of the time, they say that they have no idea on what to write. As educators, we have to find ways to make writing enjoyable and this will motivate and inspire them to engage in writing. With the right encouragement and guidance, writing can be very enjoyable. This paper explores the techniques the writer employed to help her young daughter to obtain ideas that spur her to write creatively. At the age of twelve, the latter published a series of eight stories which she wrote when she was nine. She has just published a second collection of another eight stories. It is important to create plenty of opportunities to develop writing interest. Old stories that have been told and retold for generations can be updated to create new modern stories that reflect the modern time. This technique is particularly useful for students who find it difficult to come up with original ideas. Real life experiences whether of the writer or of those around him can be a rich source of inspiration. The trick is to use all the senses and to be alert to the surroundings so that ideas can come easily. The mass media such as the television and the Internet is an important resource to find ideas on writing. Moreover, the imagination of the writer can spark off many interesting and novel ideas.

Keywords: *writing, techniques, update stories, experiences, mass media, imagination*

INTRODUCTION

In order to write well, our students need to develop adequate language proficiency and be able to come up with a variety of creative ideas that can capture the interest of the readers. Writing which enables us to express our ideas and feeling can be a pleasurable and rewarding experience. However, many students have a negative

attitude towards writing as they often complain that they do not have any idea on what to write on. When a writing assignment is given, we often hear the same complaint from the students of having no idea over and over again. More often than not, the students experience writers' block that makes it difficult for them to create essays (www.korepetycje.com).

As educators, our role is to make writing an enjoyable experience for our students. Lenhart et al. (2005) found out that those who enjoy their school writing more are more likely to engage in creative writing at school compared to those who report very little enjoyment of school writing (81% vs 69%). If our students enjoy writing, they will be keen to take part in writing activities.

DISCUSSION

Overcoming the writer's block

In this modern age, our students are too caught up in watching television or involving in other technology-based activities such as chatting on line, playing on-line games or surfing the Internet. Thus, the time spent on reading and writing is drastically reduced. It is small wonder that the students have little enthusiasm to engage in any form of writing and this includes creative writing. In addition, producing a good piece of creative writing is not easy but regular practice will give the students the tools to come up with innovative creative ideas.

Kenzabura Oe, a Nobel prize-winning novelist, said that "accumulated practice" enables the writer to come up with a landscape no one has ever seen before (Sher cited in Anderson 2006). This is most often achieved unexpectedly through the habit of work when sudden ideas, ways and means, wonderful words and phrases, and sometimes complete breakthroughs come. Therefore, regular practice will enable the students to develop the capability to develop ideas for their stories (Anderson 2006). Once the students start writing, they will be able to get more creative writing ideas (www.increasebrainpower.com). Therefore, students need constant practice that will provide opportunities for inspiration to come.

Updating old stories

All of us have read stories that are written by others and there are some which we may particularly like and remember. If we read voraciously various kinds of literature, we will be able to get a glimpse about the various styles of writing by different authors (Lad 2008) It is common to find many stories having similar elements as they are often repeated, passed on and transformed (Cox 2005).

Some of the popular stories for children have been told from generation to generation and they are still as popular today. We can try to get our students to retell a story that they have heard before, for example, "Romeo and Juliet", "The Princess and the Frog", or "Cinderella" that have been told in hundreds of different ways. Stories with a formula have proven to work and updated versions of them can be created (www.increasebrainpower.com). The story line is similar but adaptations have been made to suit the story to the present time. Numerous films have also been made based on old classical stories and we have modern versions of Cinderella being filmed. Bollywood has come up with "Bride and Prejudice" following closely the story of Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice". Recently, an updated version of

“The Princess and the Frog” has been made into a popular movie. Instead of the frog turning into a handsome prince, the girl turned into a female frog to marry the frog. Only then, she became a princess and managed to break the spell and turn the frog back into a Prince.

This idea of updating an old story was creatively used by my daughter, Victoria, when she wrote “The Donkey Bride” (Siaw, 2008). In the original story entitled, “The Squire’s Bride”, a rich squire saw a beautiful girl through a telescope and was attracted to her. Subsequently, he tried to get her father to agree to let her marry him in exchange for free rental for the land he farmed. In the end, he was tricked by the girl into marrying a mare instead. Victoria adapted this story and came up with her own version of the story, “The Donkey Bride”. A rich landlord by the name of Lord Ritchie was drawn to the sweet melody of a girl’s song and fell in love with her. He approached her father to let him marry the girl. The young girl was against the idea of marrying an old man and she cleverly tricked him into marrying a donkey instead.

Besides adapting from old stories, we can teach our students to combine stories, for example, combining the biblical story of Adam and Eve with the movie *Star Wars*. An interesting story can be created with putting a man and a woman alone on a new planet. The stories of “King Kong” and “Romeo and Juliet” may inspire the idea of a romantic story between an ape and a human who are both rejected by the ape and human societies. Therefore, the possibilities for creating stories are endless (www.increasebrainpower.com).

Observing the Environment

Writers need to develop a keen sense of awareness and sensitivities of their surroundings and be able to observe the things around (Lad 2008). The five senses of sight, sound, touch, taste and smell have to be employed. Writing helps writers to become aware, and it opens the senses to grasp the world. They must be able to see, hear, touch, taste and smell the environment. This keen observation of the environment will enable the writers to give vivid description of real life experiences. Writers need to be on the look-out for potential material and their life experience that is seen, experienced, thought of and felt will provide a valuable source of ideas (Anderson 2006).

Anderson (2006) suggested the need to carry a notebook every where to jot down interesting things; descriptions of people and places, snatches of overheard conversation, sudden insights and ideas. Our students need to be able to pick up elements of well-known characters confronted with different situations and record events and things seen and heard. An inspirational short story idea can be based on an inspiring real life incident (Lad 2008). Victoria once observed a very comical situation in school about a student who was supposed to get into the back seat of the car when her mother came to pick her up from school. She was about to go in when she suddenly changed her mind and decided to sit in front of the car. Oblivious of what was happening, her mother sped off, leaving the poor bewildered girl chasing after the car. Failing to catch up with the car, the girl came back to the school porch crying sadly for being left behind. It was a hilarious situation creating a lot of laughter and also sympathy around. Victoria was inspired to write about this story when she reached home.

Getting Inspiration from Experiences

Many times, a simple incident from one's own life can help to shape a short story (Lad 2008). We can prompt our students to change real life incidents to fit into stories. For example, Victoria's experience with her autistic brother prompted her to write about a boy who liked to bully people including the autistic boy whom his mother babysat. Victoria's keen observation of the autistic traits in her brother enabled her to write about the autistic protagonist but the plot was entirely fictional. Combining reality with fiction, Victoria narrated how the autistic boy finally rescued the bully from a group of kidnappers. Similarly, her observation of the many maids who came and went from our household because they could not adjust to the environment inspired her to write about a maid named Silly Sill who hilariously made many mistakes while working for a family

The students' own experience is a valuable resource for stories. They can relate their own experiences, for example, the first day at school or the visit to a new place. Another tip to create creative writing opportunities is to link writing topics to what the students are familiar with and are excited about (Recckio 2003). Lenhart et al. (2008) found out that in their focus groups, teens report being motivated to write by relevant, interesting, self-selected topics. Victoria had a bad experience of being teased and taunted for her habit of carrying her Tupperware bottle around. Even though it was not a pleasant experience, she wittingly turned this experience into the story of Old Maria who always carried a magic pillow which could sing every time she put her head on it. An old grouchy king who could not sleep found the pillow which cured his insomnia. Subsequently, the old king was reluctant to part with the pillow when Old Maria went to claim it. Eventually, the king exchanged the crown for Old Maria's magic pillow. Victoria's imagination has transformed her personal experience into a fairy tale!

Using the Memory

By way of association, memory often works in a spontaneous manner (Anderson 2006). Certain smell, sound or sight may bring you back to a time that is memorable. The past returns through mundane coincidences, often a chance perception—a smell, a song, a taste by way of recall (Anderson 2006). Memories can be effectively used by making them dynamic and alive. This can be done by changing key elements, for example, shifting the people, maybe making them live in a different town or continent. This may well explain why we have a Black Cinderella in one of the movie versions. The setting of the movie *Bride and Prejudice* was in India whereas the original setting of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was in England. In both versions, the mother was keen to marry off her daughters. Thus, the story can be set at a different time or present from a different person's point of view (Anderson 2006). For example, *The true story of the three little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka can be retold from the wolf's point of view. The possibilities are endless, for example "Cinderella" can be told from the point of view of one of the ugly sisters, "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" from the point of view of the troll and "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" from the point of view of Goldilocks (www.teachingideas.co.uk). Shifting the elements around will lend a new energy or perspective to your story

Using the Mass Media

The mass media such as the radio, television and newspapers report events that happen around the world such as robberies, thefts, murders and many more strange events. These significant events may trigger off inspiring stories. Anderson (2006) pointed out that we can watch out for newspaper or radio items that intrigue us in some way or yield powerful images. According to Anderson (2006), a chilling image from a newspaper article also lodged in the brain can be stored in the notebook and may find its place in a piece of creative writing. A real life issue taken from the news can be approached from a different perspective (www.increasebrainpower.com). In *The Cunning Thief* (Siaw 2008), Victoria narrated about a lazy unemployed man who kept on stealing from the people in the neighbourhood. Everyone was tired of losing his money and valuables and employ Detective Smart Alex to solve the mystery of the missing items. Jeffrey even thought of earning a reward for calling up the police but was finally outsmarted by the smart detective who caught him red handed. This story is similar to many similar incidents that are reported in the newspapers. Therefore, news items can be a valuable resource for students to come up with creative ideas.

Movies are entertaining to many people so it is likely that educators can get students interested in watching them. Therefore, they may also be a rich resource for ideas for stories. Many children and even adults love to watch “The Little Mermaid”. Victoria has loved to watch that movie on CD since she was young and she used to watch it over and over again when she was young. This movie inspired her to write “The Sea Adventure” (Siaw 2008). A young girl, Sandy, went fishing with her father and caught a big fish. They got pulled down by the fish and turned to become a mermaid and a merman when they ended up in the Kingdom of the Sea. It was a beautiful story with vivid descriptions of the underwater world full of fishes, octopuses, mermaids, mermen and the King. In the end, they turned back to human beings when they went back to land. My friend’s daughter is in love with her story and has become her fan.

Developing Effective Listening

Developing the ability to listen can also help to provide ideas for short stories, for example, an incident can be incorporated into a funny short story idea based upon something heard (Anderson 2006). Victoria loves to hear stories from me and likewise, students will enjoy story-telling sessions. Once, I related a story about a very much trusted maid who was going home after a long service. She asked permission from her employer to bake a cake which she wanted to bring home. However, she forgot to take it back. The employer was terribly shocked when she found her jewellery inside the cake when she cut it up. Victoria craftily turned the story into “The Left Behind Cake” which was renamed *The Special Cake* (Siaw 2008). In addition, I told Victoria about my cousin who stored her gold on the roof top. Some workmen came and took all her gold away. Victoria came up with a similar story entitled *The Miser’s Gold*. Therefore, having story telling sessions with students may provide the stimulus for them to come up with ideas for creative writing.

Using the Imagination

Imagination is very much needed to be able to write creatively as it allows possibilities to be explored and goes beyond what is immediately known (Anderson 2006). To produce stories that are interesting, writers need to let the creative juices flow and the imagination run wild. For example, a scary short story may need to transport the writer to a different world. "Gulliver's Travels" takes the protagonist to a variety of places that are out of this world. A creative imaginative streak would surely be helpful to make it as interesting as possible (Anderson 2006). It is important and beneficial to nurture and develop students' creativity. We need to constantly look out for a more creative approach that allows students' imaginations and creative abilities to develop (Blake n.d.).

Getting good ideas will encourage students to indulge in this pleasurable activity of creative writing. If they find ideas come to them easily, it will inspire them to write. Unlike academic or factual writing, creative writing can be a pleasurable experience because the writers are free to make use of their imagination to create. The writer uses his/her imagination to expand the topic and make it interesting thereby making it creative (www.korepetycje.com).

There is no limit to what the imagination can come up. In the story entitled, *The Right Prince*, Victoria took a young girl to Fairyland where there were fairies, goblins and talking animals. It also rained cats and dogs, literally and a fridge that Priscilla saw actually led to a supermarket where she met a Fairy Queen. She invited Priscilla into her carriage which could fly to her palace. As she did not have any children, she adopted Priscilla. So was the happy ending for the little orphan girl. This was a story that really stretched not only the writer's imagination but that of the readers as well. Another imaginative story was about a magic book which two girls had. It grew bigger and bigger by the days until eventually a man came out of it to tell the girls the story of his life and how he came to be in the book. As there is no limit to what the mind can come up with, we have to encourage students to develop their creativity and imagination to the fullest. Another story that was a hit was about a family of goblins who went on an outing at a holiday resort and ended up being captured by a group of humans who caged them up and put them in a zoo.

CONCLUSION

Language educators have an important role to play to get students interested in writing. It is important that they provide plenty of opportunities for them to write. Overcoming writers' block is necessary to get them into writing. Updating old stories and combining stories will enable students to come up with inspiring ideas to write on. In addition, a keen sense of observation and memory are important. The writer's experience is a valuable resource and the mass media such as the newspapers, radio and television also has an important role to play in providing the ideas for writing. Being able to listen well is also useful. For creative writing, the imagination is very important as it creates something that can really capture the interest of the readers. Thus, equipping students with these basic tools will provide them with some ideas for their creative writing.

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