THE CHALLENGE OF A UNIVERSITY PRACTICAL COURSE

A study on the effects of the Creative Writing Practical Course on the 3rd year students minoring in English

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Rezumat

Lucrarea de faţă îşi propune să evidenţieze atât importanţa cursului practic de scriere creativă cât şi dificultăţile pe care le implică acesta. Cursul are avantajul, dar în acelaşi timp şi dezavantajul de a da frâu liber imaginaţiei studentului, imaginaţie care, însă, trebuie canalizată spre obţinerea unor lucrări îngrijite, cizelate. Creativitatea se bucură de individualitate, însă studenţii sunt invitaţi să 'creeze' împreună, lucru care aduce poate 'crea valuri'. Acest eseu încearcă să descopere dacă acestea sunt 'unde liniştite' sau 'valuri distrugătoare'.

A university curriculum comprises besides full courses and their seminars, the practical courses also, which are meant to give the students the opportunity to apply and use the accumulated knowledge in a 'practical' manner. These types of special courses have proved to be very helpful and are enjoyed by the students who appreciate the chance they have been given. One of such activities is the creative writing practical course, designed for the third year of study, minoring in English. This course can constitute a wonderful experience for both the students as well as the teacher, but it might also be drudgery task. Many factors are to be considered in order to prevent this course from becoming the latter. If we start from the chart of the discipline, we find out a few of its objectives: the creative writing practical course is supposed to familiarise the students with different methods of writing and composing. The students are given the opportunity to put on paper their ideas freely, but in the same time, this process is being monitored carefully by the teacher, who is going to present the students with the basic rules of writing; therefore, this part of the course constitutes a sort of a guide, containing suggestions, characteristics of writing, different writing styles, and others. The students are, in the same time, made aware of their readers, of the certain parts that a written text should contain. They are invited to make pre-writing, writing and post-writing activities, to make comparisons and to draw conclusions.

Just like any other course, especially practical ones, the outcome is very much depending on many factors:

- *the students*:
  - their ability of mastering the language,
  - their inspiration,
  - their capability to work in pair or group,
  - their willingness to share their ideas with their colleagues,
  - their capacity of understanding and tolerance towards their colleagues' ideas,
  - their mood

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- *the teacher*:
  - his/her ability to make the activity appealing,
  - his/her ability to bring interesting and challenging themes for the students to debate and write on,
  - his/her capability to set the students moving, interacting, working together for the group activities,
  - his/her mood
- *the time of day*
  - a 'creative mood' is to take place neither too early in the morning, nor too late in the afternoon
- *the atmosphere*
  - a pleasant environment, some soft music, an intimate, not too large classroom, might be helpful to arouse the 'creative string' in a person

All these factors which are implied in a practical course makes it have a certain degree of difficulty. It is by far an easy job to make sure that all of them are satisfied completely; this is why a permanent relationship and communication between the protagonists is, therefore, vital.

Whenever an activity is supposed to be 'creative', there's a certain amount of subjectivity which cannot be totally overcome. Not all the students will cope with the same type of activity in the same way; some might consider a particular type of writing too difficult or too boring, too childish. In order to prevent this from happening, as much as possible, I presented the students with a wide range of activities meant to set them writing, but in the same time, I invited them to help me design this course: as a final project, they had to present their ideas of how such a creative writing practical course should be in their opinions. And the result was worthwhile.

It is important to describe the group of students which were taking part to this project, since their personalities and behaviours made me realise the sensibility of this course. They were a number of 30 students, with very different personalities; even thought they were already in the third year of study, it was the first time they had to work together in one single group at a practical course (1). This was among the main problems, since they were not used to the new arrangement, adding, therefore to the difficulty of the situation.

The bibliography I suggested was just a selective one. It comprised books from the Resource Room (2), in order to be easily accessible and available to the students:

- Alexander, *A New Approach to Summary Writing for Overseas Students*, London, 1994
- ***, *Essay and Letter Writing*, London, 1995
- Chaplen, *Paragraph Writing*, London, 1995
- Donald, *Writing Clear Paragraphs* , London, 1988
- Howatt, *Put it in Writing,* A Natural Approach to Writing English, London, 1998
- Jason, Holly, *Exploration in American Culture*, New York, 1994
- Jordan, *Academic Writing Course*, London, Glasgow, 1989
- Levin, *Short Essays,* Harcourt Publishers, 1989

The activities I suggested went from the paragraph composition to essay writing, in different stages: first, I invited the students to write on a sheet of paper whatever thoughts came into their minds, connected to whatever, in whichever order, without paying attention to any rules of order. Then I chose a certain subject and again, invited them to jot down the ideas on this subject, with no particular order. The next step was to ask them to put some order in their thoughts on paper and arrange them into a careful from. Using the brainstorming technique, I

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tried to make them realise the importance of a clear and clean writing by underlining the steps they should take to obtain the final result.

Another writing exercise presented the students with the beginning line of a story: 'As I was walking down the street, I heard footsteps behind me…' and they were supposed to continue the story. The same followed, but with the ending line given: '…I promised myself that I would never ever do something like this again.' The students enjoyed these activities and did their best in completing the task given, but the sharing with their colleagues, reading aloud sometimes constituted a problem.

An interesting creative writing seminar was held in March 2002 in Brasov, where Matthew Sweeney presented the participants with many interesting writing activities. I used some of them in the creative writing practical course I'm conducting with the third year students. In order to make the students aware of themselves and of the fact that writing implies presenting ideas about something you have enough knowledge about, I invited the students to write about themselves, following the sample given at the seminar: 'start with your name and continue by praising/mocking at yourself by using the third person singular'. Needles to say the activity created agitation among the students, this time curious to hear their colleagues' writings. The atmosphere was relaxed, students began to loosen up a little bit.

The further type of exercise made them realise how deep some of them can really think; they were given the first three lines of a poem and then invited to continue in the same manner: 'work like you don't need the money

love like you've never been hurt

dance like noone's watching…'

The lines the students used to continue were really touching and valuable: 'smile like there's no tomorrow/laugh as if your life depended on it/cry like a new born baby…'

In all these activities the students were working individually and writing for themselves, without having a particular reader/audience in mind. Things seemed to get a different turning when they had to consider their reader/audience. They declared that it was an entirely different situation having to design and polish their work according to the readers' expectation. They felt that extra-care was required in order to successfully fulfil such an attempt. The brainstorming technique helped us again in deciding which would be the main points to consider when addressing a piece of writing to someone in particular: the students admitted that no matter who it is addressed to, the written piece should be clear, polished, without ambiguous terms or expressions. It would also have to make the writer's opinion visible and understandable. They also agreed that the reader is a very important factor in deciding the shape the piece of writing is going to take. Therefore we would address differently to a group of kindergarten children than to adults when considering the same subject. The students produced beautiful pieces of writing on the subject of 'drug abuse' in different oriented writings: they made sure that the words they used were appropriate to the group they were having in mind. For example, they like the most the children addressed writing: 'Dear children, you know that when you are sick mummy is giving you a white little pill, or you have to take a little injection…even though they are not tasty or they might hurt a bit, they are good for you, and make you feel better so that you can go out and play with your friends, but if you take too much of that medicine, you can get sick again: your head and belly might hurt and you won't be able to play anymore; so, it is not good for people to take too many such pills! Make sure you always ask a doctor or your mummy! They will tell you what to take!'

In order to develop students' awareness of the 'soul and passion' writing should imply, I suggested activities which were meant to make them express their feelings and thoughts when seeing some colours or smelling some perfume. I invited them to describe the feelings that certain perfume flavor arose in them, to match it to the colour they felt fit and also to choose

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the name of the perfume. They did interesting pieces of writing having as a starting point these items. 'I smell summer and warm breeze…I feel the ocean and the seagulls…I name this "Hot Ocean" '.

All along their activity the students were reading from one of the books given in the selected bibliography: Levin, *Short Essays*, which guided them into the 'strategies for organising and developing the essay' (touching the issues of introduction, unity and thesis, topic sentence, order of the ideas, coherence, emphasis and others) and also presented them with the main types of essays: narrative, descriptive, expository, argumentative and persuasive. The students were asked to write each type of essay and in the same time were made aware of the fact that a complex essay contains a little bit of them all. (3)

Students liked writing short essays but they enjoyed just as much reading, analysing and writing poems: in the above mentioned seminar in Brasov some interesting poems were brought in discussion: William Carlos Williams' famous poem *This is Just to Say*:

'I have eaten
the plums
that were
in the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold'

The students loved the short poem and they enjoyed even more to make speculations on it: who was the one who wrote what they considered to be like a 'note on the fridge', to whom it was addressed, why; they were asked to reply this poem and also to write a 'this is just to say' poem of their own: 'never mind/it's just that the plums/were for you/I was saving to bake/ you your favourite plum cake/you just ruined it/ my surprise…'.

Another sensitive poem is Sylvia Plath's *Mirror*:

'I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love and dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful -
The eye of a little god - four cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with spectacles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with her tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness

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In me she has drowned a young girl and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.'

After having discussed a while about the poem and its implication, the students were invited to impersonate an object at their choice and write a poem. 'I'm in and out; I'm closed and open/you trust me but you sometimes slam me/they knock (at) me but you are interested in the hole I'm having in my heart (…) 'They were thrilled with the idea of giving life to objects saying that it made them feel like 'gods'. They admitted that this was a novel situation and it made them aware that lifeless things can, actually, be alive, have feelings and things to say. Of course, as expected, not all the students had the same reaction to this exercise; some found this as a childish and hilarious activity, but this did nothing but add to the challenging hue of this special writing course.

The majority of these exercises were performed by the students individually or in pairs. Towards the end of the semester the students were suggested to engage together into a whole group activity and have as a final result a short story. The idea sounded interesting at the beginning, until they had to agree upon what the theme, the characters, the ideas should be. Students seemed to encounter many difficulties due to many factors: first of all, the degree of tolerance towards one another they were ready to display (as they were having very different and strong personalities): this means that some of them were suggesting a theme or an idea and some others immediately demolished it, sometimes without even bothering to replace it with something constructive. On the other hand, some of the students were always present for the practical course and actually constructing something, while others only came from time to time, and even mocked at the outcome they found. The job of keeping them from falling off the track was really a very challenging and difficult one, since they themselves admitted that they have never been put into such a circumstance where they were supposed to work together, as a whole. Some of them even went as far as to accuse the teacher, as their monitor, for having them 'cope' with such a situation; they said that the teacher should have known that such an attempt was doomed from the very beginning. The problem was that I almost believed it myself, if it hadn't been for the rest of the students who actually managed to deal with the novelty of the circumstance in the right manner. I consider that this moment was one of great significance in my teaching career: I realised once more that students can be actually very difficult to deal with, since their personalities are in the process of completing and shaping. This age is a tricky one, when they sometimes have the tendency of demolishing the ideas surrounding them. It is the teacher the one who should try to maintain the situation under control and to be patient and diplomatic, wise enough not to burst out at the first sign things seem to shake.

Considering that many of the students in question were going to become teachers, I invited them to prepare as a final project for this creative writing practical course, a plan of how they thought and felt this course should be like. Here are some of the students thoughts:

- 'the classroom should not be a regular one all the time, (…) a room with chairs and a carpet , if possible, so that the environment should be cosy enough for the participants to get rid of their masks and feel at home, with all the implications of the feeling; lighting a candle might also help; (…) the setting is very important when creativity is to be achieved (…)' (Bi.K.) (4)
- 'I would play some music while I would ask the students to write a poem' (…) (B.K.)
- 'I would ask the students to write a speech and provide them with some tips for speech writing' (…) (C.V)
- '(…) this course does not only mean writing, it means communication as well: it implies a lot of inventivity; for example, certain games might develop our capacity of creation and spontaneity' (…) (C.D.)

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- 'a good idea is not enough; we must learn how to choose the most appropriate words and how to give a shape to a piece of writing' (…) (D.L)
- 'a mysterious picture might help the students express their inner impressions' (…) (G.C.)
- 'I would make sure that such a practical course was taking place at a proper time of the day, not too early nor too late' (…) (I.E.)
- 'the use of some audio-video materials may increase the students' interest for attending the course (…) (I.H.)

The examples might continue, but the general idea was that the students were really happy to have the opportunity to organise the course. They felt important enough to be trusted in doing such a delicate project. Only when they were asked to write this final task did they realise the difficulty this implied: they became aware of how careful they had to be in order to create a proper course, so as to suit (almost) everybody. They also figured out the responsibility they had to take and many of them admitted that this was one of the most difficult tasks they had to accomplish in the three university years they've been through so far.

This writing activity proved to be not just an usual university practical course in which students are presented with writing techniques, but also a special course in which students are required to work individually as well as in group(s) and to deal with their colleagues, to appreciate their efforts and value their opinions, be it different from their owns. It was an interesting course from the teacher's point of view, as well, since it brought along interesting and new situations, not always easy to deal with, but this only added to the challenge of it, eliminating, therefore, the danger of boredom.

NOTES

(1) in the first two years of study, the students in question were organised in two groups, while in the third year they were united, forming now one group
(2) a small library at the university which provides students with books in English
(3) many of the students were used to such types of writings, since the majority has graduated intensive English classes, where essay writing was quite common
(4) the names of the students being cited here are represented by their initials

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