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Responsiveness to culture through literature: Creative writing as culturally responsive pedagogy

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This position paper argues that creative writing can be a fruitful tool for cultural responsiveness in secondary education and calls for creative writing to be viewed as a more natural part of language teachers' culturally responsive pedagogical repertoire. The integration of creative writing exercises in culturally responsive language arts education may rouse a strengthened voice, benefit cultural literacy, engender the discovery and exploration of individual funds of knowledge, enhance relational competence, and bring about the critical crafting of and engagement with cultural representations. These arguments are convergent with the view that teaching, in order to be culturally responsive, should originate from students' funds of knowledge, taking both subject content and relational aspects into consideration – and this paper proposes that creative writing is uniquely positioned to facilitate these aims.

Keywords: creative writing, cultural empowerment, culturally responsive pedagogy, language and literature education, writing instruction

Introduction

In the educational framework of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), students' opportunities for cultural empowerment are seen as intrinsically linked to their chances of academic success, cultural competence and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Therefore, being culturally responsive means recognising and valuing the diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences of all students. Teachers should strive to create an inclusive and equitable learning environment that promotes mutual respect, open dialogue and critical thinking. This is done by including and welcoming students' cultural knowledges, perspectives and practices. In other words, a culturally responsive teacher needs to provide suitably diverse content for learning as well as foster constructive relationships in the classroom (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, a recurring challenge perceived by teachers is a lack of content knowledge regarding various cultural practices and a similar lack of relational competency which would allow them to approach their students' cultural identities in constructive ways (Samuels, 2018). In this paper, I propose that creative writing is a potentially unique advantageous pedagogical practice for approaching these challenges.

Creative Writing and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The term *creative writing* is somewhat contentious, as it is paradoxically obscure yet straightforward. On the one hand, it may be construed as 'writing that is creative', to which one may respond that, as McVey (2008) asserts, 'All writing is creative writing', given that practically any writing task will involve creative reformulations of 'the raw materials of language, experience, knowledge, textual sources and the author's own ideas and imaginings to bring something into existence that did not exist before' (p. 289). This is indeed an important factor that should not be written off. But on the other hand, *creative writing* is a well-established practice that has been in use in American contexts since at least the late 19th century (Myers, 1993), and today creative writing has amassed a multitude of courses, handbooks, workshops, and the like (Pulls, 2019). Consequently, the term *creative writing* is commonly used to refer to the writing of a literary text, such as poetry, fiction, drama (i.e. scriptwriting for theatre, film, video games, etc.), and freer forms of non-fiction prose (e.g. creative essays or biographies). Closely related terms are, for instance, *literary writing* (cf. Ahmadi, 2021) and *imaginative writing* (Mendelowitz & Lazar, 2020), and they are often used interchangeably. However, there is also a prevalent educational connotation to creative writing (at least in English language contexts), namely, that it is studied, carried out, and discussed collectively (Harper, 2006). With this in

mind, creative writing as referred to in this paper is based on Myers' (1993) definition: 'Creative writing is the name that might be given to any effort that undertakes to restore the idea of literature as an integrated discipline of thought and activity, of textual study and practical technique' (p. 279). That is to say, creative writing as a pedagogical tool may be used to explore, express, and exchange knowledge, ideas and values; to study literature through the active production of literary texts; and to practice writing skills (see also Mendelowitz & Lazar, 2020; Venuta, 2020).

Culturally responsive pedagogy revolves around students' cultural identities, with *culture* being defined by Gay (2018) as 'a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our own lives as well as the lives of others' (p. 8). As such, CRP is not primarily concerned with questions of creativity or artistic expression, but, as I will attempt to show, it seems that much of what CRP aims for indeed can be attained through integrating creative writing into language arts subjects.

Gay (2018) asserts early in her seminal book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, that stories are part and parcel of human beings, and they can facilitate the understanding of other human beings:

> [Stories are] powerful means for people to establish bridges across other factors that separate them (such as race, culture, gender, and social class), penetrate barriers to understanding, and create feelings of kindredness. In other words, stories educate us about ourselves and others; they capture our attention on a very personal level, and entice us to see, know, desire, imagine, construct, and become more than what we currently are. (Gay, 2018, pp. 2–3)

Partaking in stories can, in other words, be a means of widening perspectives and engaging with people across time and space. It can also allow students to tell their own stories, in which dialogue can be entered, vague ideas and feelings can be made visible, and knowledge and questions can be used to create new texts to discuss – aspects which Gay (2018) brings forward. However, Gay's book as a whole does not pertain to students' creative writing or storytelling but rather a decidedly wider framing of story: 'Even though "story" is usually associated with people telling about themselves and/or events in which they have been involved, the explanations of educational ideas, paradigms, and proposals constitute "story" as well' (p. 4). Gay's book is interspersed with narrative vignettes exemplifying culturally responsive teaching, and, implicitly, the potential power of storytelling. There is also mention of the possibilities of '*multidimensional* culturally responsive teaching'

(Gay, 2018, p. 39) involving various art forms in the teaching practice. Hence, culturally responsive pedagogy can without a doubt be said to embrace the bringing of students' individual and collective stories to the fore. Nonetheless, there is little mention of how these stories may be explored through creative writing practices. Likewise, Ladson-Billings, who is commonly cited as one of the core originators of CRP (Gay, 2018; Mendelowitz & Lazar, 2020), does not expressly put value in involving learners' cultures through their own written explorations thereof in either her ground-breaking article, 'But that's just good teaching!' (Ladson-Billings, 1995) or her revisitation of the framework in the book, *Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Asking a Different Question* (2021).

This is not to say that there are no researchers who explicitly mention and explore creative writing practices as a means of realising CRP – there are, of course (e.g. Dworin, 2006; Iyengar & Smith, 2016). There is an emerging subfield of culturally responsive writing pedagogy, which more explicitly includes dialogic and creative writing practices, although it remains a small area of research and seems mostly focused on elementary and middle school pedagogy (Mendelowitz & Lazar, 2020). And the fact that two of the main scholars in the field make little to no mention of the potential for culturally responsive exchange through creative writing seems fairly emblematic of the marginal position that it holds. This is also not meant as a critique of Gay or Ladson-Billings – in no way do I mean to claim that there is some intrinsic connection between culturally responsive or relevant pedagogy and creative writing which these key figures in the field have somehow failed to include. Rather, this position is similar to that which creative writing has held in the field of secondary language education at large during the last few decades, mainly, being seen as something separate from both language and literature didactics and secondary education in general, especially in Sweden (Hjort, 2017; Malmström, 2017; Pulls, 2019). Consequently, it is interesting to further explore what may be accomplished by bringing creative writing closer to the foreground of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Culturally Responsive Creative Writing

Samuels (2018) describes how teachers may feel insecure in their ability to teach in culturally responsive ways as well as experience limited opportunities in which to accomplish this:

> Teachers spoke extensively about the demands and restraints of time and limited resources. When time is already restrained by intensive curricular demands and large class sizes, teachers explained

> it could be overwhelming to accommodate learning opportunities for all populations, especially when striving to meet the needs of a diverse classroom population. In addition, when access to resources or pedagogical strategies is limited or teachers do not know where to find them, they may not have information, materials, or knowledge they need to facilitate a diverse, representative, and inclusive curriculum. (Samuels, 2018, p. 27)

There are a number of ways in which the integration of creative writing practices into language arts instruction may constructively alleviate these issues. One way is to have students explore and communicate knowledge based on their cultural points of reference, with the material for learning in part produced by the learners themselves. Another way is to engage with learners' cultural knowledges and interests, so that they may feel more involved in studying, thus potentially strengthening both learning and literacy. A third way is for learners to be positioned as individuals whose voices, cultures, experiences and ideas matter, thus potentially strengthening their sense of self-worth and identity. Finally, as more types of writing are made open for students, more students may feel invested in the craft. These possibilities are detailed below.

Material for Learning

A central concern for many teachers in relation to CRP is the time and knowledge needed to select learning material that can make all students in a culturally diverse group feel represented and valued (Samuels, 2018). For teaching to be culturally responsive, it is key that students are given the opportunity to work from positions of what they already know as well as what they do not know (Gay, 2018). Students should meet with subject matter which they can connect with, scrutinise, challenge and otherwise react to in a multitude of ways and from a multitude of perspectives. Thus, culturally responsive teaching takes as a point of departure the students in the classroom. By incorporating creative writing tasks, the students naturally become the starting point for learning and conversation, and part of the onus of providing knowledge and materials is shared between the teachers and the students. If the students are encouraged and trusted to bring their own experiences, knowledge and practices to the classroom, the question of what content to include becomes a shared one. Tokenistic representations of surface-level culture such as talk of 'ethnic food, clothing and holidays' (Morrison et al., 2019, p. 14) can be avoided (or supplemented) in a culturally diverse classroom if the content is not dictated solely by the teacher, who may or may not possess sufficient knowledge to implement such representations in a sensitive and authentic manner. The

teacher's task in this context is to be responsive to their students' *funds of knowledge* – the unique resources for learning which each learner's social network affords (see Subero et al., 2015, pp. 38–40) in order to implement material that facilitates these opportunities (Morrison et al., 2019). Doing so allows the students the opportunities to succeed in school while also developing their cultural competences and critical thinking skills (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The role of the teacher is, then, to introduce the themes at hand, to contribute with necessary subject-specific knowledge, to assist in finding information, and to facilitate meaningful conversation (cf. Björkman & Bromseth, 2019). This type of dialogic exchange is in line with Freire's (1970/2018, 1974/2013) vision of a conscientising education, in which a reciprocal exchange between educators and students is promoted, avoiding a 'banking' (Freire, 1970/2018, p. 72) form of education in which the teacher dictates what is to be learned and how. It is not enough to simply deliver texts dealing with various cultures and expect learners to be able to engage with them in a fruitful manner. Instead, teachers need to be involved in the conversations in order to validate students' perspectives and experiences, mediate between conflicting views, and provide viewpoints that may be missing (cf. Morrison et al., 2019. To do so, teachers must continually examine their own points of reference and interpretations thereof (Banks, 1998) so that they may consciously resist essentialist perspectives and illusions of objectivity, and be open to others' experiences and viewpoints in a democratic spirit. Teachers should, at least in part, be aided in this process by allowing learners to provide their own cultural representations in addition to those which are pre-existing and professionally constructed.

Another possible concern for teachers is a lack of support for creative writing practices in policy documents or local discourses in general. In the context of Swedish upper secondary education, there is little to no explicit support for the creative crafting of texts, which can make teachers hesitant to implement such approaches to any larger extent (Malmström, 2017, 2020; Pulls, 2019). However, in addition to writing literary texts, there are other ways that creative writing may be used to achieve the same goals. Through the implementation of creative writing tasks, learners will likely find that they need to explore the knowledge necessary to formulate their thoughts on the matter at hand. Thereafter, they can re-formulate that information so that it mirrors their own ideas on the subject. Having constructed these texts, they might then read each other's texts – or read/perform them to each other – and discuss what they have written and learned while writing (Venuta, 2020). Needless to say, it would not be realistic – nor even fair – to expect learners to always

provide well-rounded, unproblematic, or illustrative representations of cultural knowledge. This proposal that students be invited to provide collaborative learning material through literary texts should not be seen as a suggestion that teachers completely hand over the responsibility for the texts that are worked with in the classroom. Throughout the writing and sharing of texts, there will be an ongoing process of learning, and teachers should remain responsive to their learners' needs – as they should during any classroom work (Ladson-Billings, 1995). And the creative crafting of literary texts may be a fruitful way of gleaning what those needs are – be they learning-related or emotional.

Involved Learning

Ladson-Billings (1995) sheds light on the fact that marginalised students often might feel like they do not belong or cannot be true to themselves at school. She proposes that teachers make use of their students' culture to close the gap between students' identities and the subject matters at hand, for example, by working with the lyrics to popular music. This might be taken one step further by allowing the students to write (and possibly perform, depending on the group) their own lyrics as a means of studying poetry from both productive and receptive perspectives. Nordberg (2019) proposes a similar approach as a way to learn about form and to become closer to the content of poems – an approach which echoes the original intent of creative writing as it was devised in the late 1800s (Myers, 1993). This also relates to another teacher, whose work Ladson-Billings (1995) describes, who instructed her students to write informal texts and then translate or transpose the texts to academic form. Encouraging the students to write texts that are presented as song lyrics rather than poetry can be a way to bridge students' possible reluctance towards poetry while simultaneously immersing learners in the 'community of practice' (Malilang, 2019, p. 6) that collaborative creative writing can represent. Moreover, students can be made aware of how the mastery of various levels of formality is a strength, rather than seeing one variant as the 'correct' one and all else as more or less improper (Gay, 2018, p. 91). Dworin (2006) describes a similar process in which multilingual learners are tasked with asking family members about stories from their lives, choosing one to write in the language they are more proficient in before translating it into the subject target language. In so doing, the learners make use of and explore their funds of knowledge while also honing their storytelling and writing skills.

It may also be that working with literary texts can facilitate a more nuanced knowledge of or sensitivity towards cultures that are not represented in the classroom than so-called hard facts can. Scott and Huntington (2002) show how students working with a poem about the Côte d'Ivoire may have gained a deeper understanding of, appreciation for, and empathy towards the country and its culture(s) than those reading from a fact sheet, even though the poem presents less concrete information. Instead of drawing such a hard line and removing the so-called hard facts from the learning situation, I propose a combination of the two. Perhaps by writing replies to the aforementioned poem, the students could enter into dialogue with the text and share some of their own views and feelings regarding the issues raised, similar to an exercise presented by Berge and Blomqvist (2012) in which parts of two works of fiction are chosen to create a dialogue between texts. During the writing process, the students might realise that they lack information about the Côte d'Ivoire and seek out information to build upon while writing. That way, the learning may become more authentic and emanate from the students' own knowledge and curiosity (Bennett et al., 2018; Scott & Huntington, 2002). Venuta (2020) illustrates the gap between reading literature followed by composing written reports and actively engaging with the literature through creative writing:

> This kind of writing—observing and reporting on our particular observations—perpetuates 'othering'. If we are to cultivate an education that encourages myriad perspectives, cultures, understandings, and truths, then we must motivate our students to write creatively. Creative writing does not report—it engages. Creative writing forces the writer to assume the point of view of the subject material. It stimulates 'becoming'. (Venuta, 2020, p. 240)

Hence, creative writing may also be a method for more homogenous student groups to approach representations of diverse cultures with their own creativity, using reading and writing to strengthen students' capacity for empathy (cf. Svensson, 2018). Such activities may also garner opportunities for classroom discussions of many of the issues that CRP deals with, such as essentialist perspectives, cultural appropriation, or inequality (cf. Gay, 2018).

Voice Work and (Dark) Funds of Knowledge

Szelei et al. (2019) highlight the importance of what they call *voice work*, wherein students are given the opportunity to speak their own truths through authentic dialogic situations. Students need the agency to share their own perspectives and emotions, and to have them be heard. This may be

done in quite organic ways through creative writing. Through working with storytelling, students may gain a better understanding of how to frame their experiences, potentially making them clearer for themselves as well as others (Bommarco & Parmenius Swärd, 2018; Piekut, 2018). Subero et al. (2015, p. 43) describe a 'double democratic approach' in which students are encouraged to use and share their own lived experiences in connection with more general subject matters. In one project, students use the medium of clay animation video to portray experiences of violence and to come up with conceivable solutions to the situations – thereby both processing potentially traumatic experiences and exploring ways to deal with them (Subero et al., 2015). In a similar vein, a drama project recounted by Szelei et al. (2019) puts the students in the positions of researchers, writers, actors and discussants by having them examine issues of racism at school before composing a play about the theme, incorporating interactive drama exercises to further dissect the theme in collaboration with their audience. The researchers conclude that this can be a fruitful way to empower the students to find knowledge on their own and start from their own motivations and knowledges instead of risking that the teachers (in a well-meaning attempt to be inclusive) encourage othering through applying essentialising perspectives on social issues and cultural identities.

Identity is an important part of both CRP and creative writing. As Porto (2009) writes, 'Identity matters because it is an aspect of how humans make sense of the world and their experiences in it, including their experiences with reading and writing' (p. 46). Iyengar and Smith (2016) illustrate both the importance of identity and the potential for constructively connecting cultural identity and creative writing. Making use of a writing workshop, Asian Indian learners are coached in creatively writing about their views on the value of cultural traditions and then making use of what they have written to discuss their experiences of othering micro-aggressions in school. Iyengar and Smith thus highlight the importance of actively nurturing learners' voices:

> Educators should not assume complacency because of the students' silence. Masked by their academic achievement, the writers of this study felt frustrated and disillusioned with the Americentric curriculum by which they were forced to study. In their narratives, the writers noted the absence of any meaningful inclusion of their culture in their academic activities. In this way, the students are making a critical commentary on the exclusionary and the cultural homogenizing nature of school. (Iyengar and Smith, 2016, p. 115)

In having been given the opportunity to write creatively about and to discuss their cultural identities and experiences of othering, these learners were able to assert their voices – in writing as well as verbally – in ways that they likely would not otherwise. This should be worth embracing.

There are also more literacy-related ways in which creative writing may strengthen learners' sense of identity and self-regard. Nordberg (2019) speaks of *literary identity*, suggesting that having students take the position of authors as well as readers will result in them forming a stronger bond with literature and being more likely to view themselves as both creative people whose perspectives have value and as active literature readers. Thus, by developing, reformulating, and sharing fragments of their identities through creative writing and through reading each other's texts, students' sense of identity and literacy skills may be strengthened in tandem (see also Malmström, 2012; Venuta, 2020).

In another project described by Subero et al. (2015), 'The students construct knowledge by creating particular artefacts such as poems' (p. 47). Using these creative modes of communication, the students are given the opportunity to examine and voice their own knowledge in general, and 'dark funds of knowledge' (Subero et al., 2015, p. 44) in particular, while also exchanging perspectives and learning from each other (Ladson-Billings, 1995). By utilising this synthesis of experiences, knowledge, and literacy, teachers may aid in augmenting learners' 'positive social identity (academic proficiency) produced by recognizing of students' language and texts such as poems written by themselves' (Subero et al., 2015, p. 42). Bommarco and Parmenius Swärd (2018) assert that all students have stories to tell and that the classroom can be a place for them to share their stories with each other. While teachers may feel apprehension when encountering these dark funds of knowledge, Bommarco and Parmenius Swärd contend that it is necessary to do so for education to be empowering, as being given the chance to tell stories which learners find important can strengthen their sense of self-worth as well as their cultural and personal empowerment. Moreover, the texts produced might create opportunities for teachers to check in on their students' mental and physical wellbeing (Bommarco & Parmenius Swärd, 2018), as caring is an important goal in CRP (cf. Morrison et al., 2019).

However, it is important not to assume that all students wish or are able to share deeply personal stories in a school setting (Gay, 2018; Pulls, 2019). It can be detrimental to demand that students write literary texts from a too narrowly defined place of 'authenticity' or 'truth', expecting all

learners to write biographical texts, as culture should not be understood as solely what can be easily observed or recounted (Porto, 2009, p. 48). Literary texts need not be confined to lived experiences or strict realism to provide opportunities for cultural exchange, and it would be a pitfall of essentialism to expect students to only write texts explicitly pertaining to 'their cultures'. The strength of literature is, of course, that it allows for various degrees of veracity. For instance, Ross (2017) exemplifies how fiction can be used as a scientific method, exploring possible futures through a synthesis of factual knowledge and imaginative narratives. And the inherent intertextuality of literature is well established, as Kristeva (1966/1986) explains, 'Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another' (p. 37). Therefore, students might bring their own repertoires of knowledge, preexisting stories (be they lived, shared or fantastical) and other cultural references into their writing. Bommarco and Parmenius Swärd (2018) propose that students should be encouraged to write about their most dark or personal stories from other points of view, thus fictionalising parts of their stories. This way, the students can gain some distance from the source material and be able to talk about their own texts as stories (be they narrative, poetic or otherwise), but still be able to make use of the therapeutic potential of creative writing to (cf. Bolton, 1999). Doing so may also create opportunities for discussions about, for instance, more or less reliable narrators, and whether a reader is always expected to believe or agree with a story's main characters or narrator(s) (cf. Smith, 1991). In short, if handled in a sensitive manner, there seems to be clear advantages to allowing students who feel so inclined to tell their stories in the classroom. Through bringing more personal – potentially dark – funds of knowledge to light through literary writing, the students are also given the opportunity to reflect on their own and each other's valuation (Banks, 1998; Myrdal, 1969), which may allow them to better understand their positionings even while doing other, more academically aligned work (Malmström, 2020).

Conclusion

In having students write creatively from their own funds of knowledge and discoursing about their texts in addition to working with other materials which provide even more strands to the tapestry of culture, the content, pedagogy and relationship aspects of culturally responsive pedagogy will naturally intertwine. CRP exists on the premise that chances for learners to express and reflect on their cultural knowledge and identities are instrumental in their academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Morrison et al., 2019), and as we have seen, creative writing can be a conducive way of

integrating cultural expression, knowledge exploration, and literacy learning. Moreover, part of the learning content will come from the students themselves, and the teacher will organically gain opportunities to select material that can either start the conversation or complement the students' works. This form of dialogical approach demands a high degree of trust and cooperation in the classroom. As with any culturally responsive pedagogy – or even 'good' pedagogy, for that matter (see the title of Ladson-Billings, 1995) – teachers must strive to empower students whose voices struggle to be heard, provide perspectives that may be missing in the classroom, and set a positive example by displaying curiosity and open-mindedness without essentialising, exoticising or othering.

It is more than likely that not all learners (or teachers) will find the writing and collaborative discussions of self-made literary texts to be the most empowering or enlightening way of working, as will be the case with any pedagogical approach. Creative writing cannot and should not replace all (or perhaps even any) of the other work carried out in the language subject classroom – rather, I mean to suggest that it might complement it. And as creative writing seems to have been a mostly implicit part of culturally responsive teaching (Mendelowitz & Lazar, 2020), it may prove gainful to make it more visible as a potentially valuable tool for culturally responsive pedagogy – in practice and in research.

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