

## LOCAL VOICES IN CREATIVE WRITING

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### ABSTRACT

Creative writing is now on the centre stage in the world literary discourse. Beside other numerous advantages, the creative writing is also used to put forward the unheard voices hidden in the mainstream literary works. In the recent development, creative writing is also a means to unearth the local voices in order to be put in a world stage, introduced to a larger audience to achieve a better understanding between cultures.

Since creative writing is no longer locked in the three literary genres, namely poetry, prose, or drama, the teaching of creative writing in university classrooms needs reorienting. Traditionally, creative writing is taught within a relatively strict prescribed formula. The students have a limited freedom in terms of the format and the content. This paper tries to present the experiment done in a creative writing classroom which applies unorthodox teaching method of creative writing. The result is somewhat beyond expectation, the students are able to write fluently with more diverse issues, covering from political to cultural ones. The method is also able to uncover the local voices which are hidden and sometimes deliberately forgotten.

*Keywords:* local voices, traditional creative writing, unorthodox teaching

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Creative Writing is now becoming a flourishing discipline which encompasses not only finished product of writing in the form of poem, fiction, or drama, but also a vanguard of the means to voice the unheard voices hidden behind the humdrums of mainstream media. Such a phenomenon happens because there is a changing attitude towards Creative Writing, which is likely caused by the growing discontent of some creative writers who see the widespread influence of the mainstream media to the mind of the people. The massive power of the media prevents the emergence of writing products to start to grow. Harper in *On Creative Writing* states that "...most often the term 'Creative Writing' is used to refer to the activities we engage in. The results of these activities, alternatively, are most often referred to by their specific 'artefactual' names –for example, the 'poem', 'script', 'story' or 'novel' that emerges from the acts and actions of Creative Writing." (Harper, 2010: 4). Any deviation from the uniformity will be subject to termination.

It is in such milieu, the teaching of Creative Writing finds its utmost importance. Traditionally, Creative Writing is taught to equip students with skills to write "fiction, poetry, script, narrative non-fiction, and the feature side of journalism" (May, 2007: 1). The students are demanded those genres using certain methods which have been prescribed. When writing fictions, for example, the students should follow the traditional plot: opening, complication, rising action, climax, resolution. A student who tries to use a plot other than the formula set is considered not complying with the standard.

The difficulties in teaching Creative Writing lie on the term 'creative' itself. If the students are told to follow the rules set, it will become *contradictio in termini* (a contradiction in terms). While in Creative Writing the students should be 'creative', at the same time they have to comply with the sets of procedures. This seemingly contradictory of the creative writing directives produces a persistent headache both to the students and the lecturers.

In another occasion, for example in narratives, a writing directive states that the students should recount what they experience in their life. The students then write a narrative about what they undergo in their specific time and space. They do not consider to create more than what they are told to do since any action deviated from the directive will not get a good appreciation. The students are not encouraged to be

‘creative’, they are just told to do things already prescribed. In this case, the sense of ‘creative’ which should be the norm for Creative Writing cannot be generated.

This paper tries to look into the matter, the limitation on the writing directive, particularly the aspect of recounting experience, and to provide another method of writing, which also has a task of making the local voices heard.

## 2. FROM IMAGINATION TO CREATIVITY

Creative Writing used to be seen only limited to the literary genre, “for published works of fiction, poetry and drama.” (Dawson, 2005: 21). Recent definition says that “Creative writing does not have to refer specifically to ‘literary’ works...but to any writing which is ‘creative’, i.e. original, unconventional, expressive, etc.” (Dawson, 2005: 21). In addition, there is an attempt to extend the scope of creative writing, not only to isolated in mainstream literary forms, but also as a ‘pursuit of creativity’, enabling writers to extricate themselves from the traditional genres (novels, plays, poems).

Thus, the creative writing classes should not only be limited to the creation of plays, poems, and novels, but also other non-fiction works. Students should be trained to widen their horizon and creativity. One of many ways to achieve is to encourage students to do research before they start writing.

## 3. EXPERIENCE-BASED STORIES

The traditional way of teaching creative writing class is to ask students to write their personal narrative based on their experience. The students are asked to recount their stories and apply them on certain formula as follows:

Social Function	Generic Structure	Language Features
To retell events for the purpose of informing or entertaining. Events are usually arranged in a temporal sequence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Orientation</li> <li>Events</li> <li>Re-orientation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on individual participants</li> <li>Use of past tense</li> <li>Focus on temporal sequence of events</li> </ul>

With the fixed formula in mind, the students have no room for creativity. Any effort to deviate from the provided format is considered ‘illegal’ and do not deserve a good score.

An excerpt from a student is as follows:

<b>Orientation</b>	<i>It was a cloudy afternoon. The bus which drove me to my grandma’s place was bumpy. The aroma from passengers made me sick.</i>
<b>Events</b>	<i>It was terrible. To make matter worse, the traffic was so crowded. It was almost stuck. The bus air-conditioning did not make any comfort. I almost jumped out of the bus and walked instead Suddenly, a motorcycle from opposite direction hit the bus. The rider fell off and his helmet was throw away. All bus passengers shouted surprisingly. The bus halted suddenly, and the passengers got down the bus. (...his experience in his grandma’s house)</i>
<b>Reorientation</b>	<i>It was a terrible experience at first, but at the end I got a wonderful moment at my grandma’s house.</i>

The excerpt shows that the writer recounted an experience during his journey to his grandma’s house. In the middle of his journey, the bus which drove him got an accident and it caused an unexpected delay. Fortunately, however, at the end of the day, he was happy because while in his grandma’s house he found some interesting events.

The excerpt shows that the student seems not to explore further about his experience little bit more detailed. His writing is bland since there is no exploration about what he was feeling in a more engaging way. He seemed to focus on how to deliver the events in a sequence, his travel and later his experience in his grandma’s house. The fixed formula prevents him from furthering his recounting of what he saw,

heard, and felt. Instead, he emphasized on sequencing his events in a chronological order.

The following is from other student:

<b>Orientation</b>	<i>My holiday in Bali was wonderful. Many events happened there, like kite festival at Kuta beach, ogoh-ogoh ceremony, and kecak dance.</i>
<b>Events</b>	<i>Kite festival at Kuta was held every year. The participants from all over the world come to Bali to join the festival. I was lucky because when I was in Bali, the kite festival was on progress. I saw many beautiful kites with various forms. They were amazing. (...ogoh-ogoh ceremony, kecak dance)</i>
<b>Reorientation</b>	<i>Many events in Bali made my holiday unforgettable. I will go there again someday.</i>

The above excerpt tells about some events that happened in Bali during her holiday. She was excited because she was there right when the events took place, such as kite festival, *ogoh-ogoh* ceremony, *kecak* dance, and many others. The writer recounted what she saw in every event.

The same case is found in the above example. The student seemed to be afraid to develop her imagination and to tell things which are beyond what she saw. The writing is 'dry' and does not either inform or entertain readers.

The experience-based writing seems unable to encourage students to go out of their box. The instruction given although already reiterated that the students are allowed to enrich their experience with some personal touches fails to create an informing and entertaining story.

#### 4. FROM EXPERIENCE TO RESEARCHING THE LOCAL VOICES

Many famous writers count on researches to create an interesting and plausible story. They do not have to be involved in the real happening, but they just do a thorough research to make their stories lively and plausible. The plausibility becomes the cornerstone in a research-based story. Materials related to the happening must be collected, examined, and sorted out in order to support the story. The importance of keeping the story plausible has become a challenge for a creative writer.

Stephen Crane in his renown novel *The Red Badge of Courage* did an extensive research on the Civil War and was successful to recreate the event without ever plunging himself into the war. Crane was born after the war, and had not experienced the battle himself. Nevertheless, the novel is known for its realism. He used various contemporary and written accounts as inspiration. He may also have interviewed veterans involved in the battle.

One contemporary writer who was also successful to write a novel without ever experiencing himself is Jose Dalisay, a Filipino who won *The 2007 Man Asian Literary Prize Jury* for his novel *Soledad's Sister*. The novel tells about the fate of a Filipina migrant worker who died in a country in Middle East. Jose Dalisay claimed that he never set foot on Middle East soil and all his knowledge about migrant workers was entirely based on his research.

In my creative writing class, the students were instructed to do a research on an issue of their choice and were given a freedom as to how to create their stories, not only creating a recount or other canonized forms of literary genre. The result was surprising and totally different from when they were asked to write based on a fixed formula as explained previously.

Here are some titles of the student's writing:

<b>Title</b>	<b>Issues Researched</b>	<b>Forms</b>
<i>An Imaginary Interview with Pramoedya Ananta Toer</i>	Pramoedya's views on capitalism and his country	Feature
<i>Sand of Life</i>	A student who organized a protest against the province authority to mine ironsand in Kulonprogo	Short story
<i>My Country Can Do No Wrong</i>	An Indonesian migrant worker coming home from Middle East, only to find her fortune was robbed by a corrupt system.	Short story

In *An Imaginary Interview with Pramoedya Ananta Toer*, the student positioned himself as a reporter who interviewed Pramoedya in Buru island. He did research on Buru island, the way to get there, the condition of the prison, and Pramoedya's views. Here is the excerpt:

*Buru island was located 3° 24 0 S, 126° 40 0 E. It was hard to reach the island which was known as a place to exile political prisoners. One of the prisoner was Pramoedya Ananta Toer. He was jailed because of his views which was not in line with the New Order regime. Serving about 14 years in prison and deprived of his writing utensils did not break him. Honestly, it was not my utmost interest to interview the man. But when my boss asked me to do it, what could I do?*

*Travelling to a bleak, desolated island was not something you wished for. I listened to my boatmen boringly when they bragged about how they had survived some storm when they took guests or tourist to the island. Yes, tourists. Some nosy tourists wanted to know how the island looked like, only to do selfie there and uploaded in their social media to show that they were adventurous enough....*

The student had to imagine how to get to Buru island, the assignment that he had to carry out, which he acknowledged it as boring, and how the island was also visited by tourists. However, if we noticed carefully, there was an issue of plausibility here. How come an island intended to isolate political prisoners is flocked by tourists?

The problem of plausibility does not only belong to a creative writing beginner. Jose Dalisay in his novel *Soledad's Sister* did a mistake which perhaps he did not realize. Here is the mistake he made: "[The journey to the Philippines from a country in Middle East] took over 5,000 miles and stretched the daylight with it for most of the way across the Indian Ocean." (Dalisay, 2008: 8). Even a seasoned creative writer has made a mistake!

In the next part, the student writing *An Imaginary Interview* presented the summary of his interview in a question and answer format as follows:

- ...
- Q[uestion]**      **It seems that you have no intention to stop writing what you believe.**
- P[ramoedya]      Never. They can beat me, they can chain my body, but they can't beat my soul, they can't rein my mind
- Q**                    **The regime offered you a sum of money if you stop disseminating your radical thought.**
- P                    Money is nothing for me. My love for this country and its people cannot be bribed. I detest this regime for lying to its own people.
- Q**                    **Now that you are deprived from writing utensils, how do you put what you're thinking on papers?**
- P                    (*smiling bitterly*) As I told you, they can take anything from me, but they can't take my mind. I cannot tell you how, but I have a way.
- ...

The student did a research on how Pramoedya was treated during when he was in jail. The data he collected were then sorted out to make a dramatic event. The more data he collected, the more detailed his account of Pramoedya.

The creative writing can also be used as a means to raise local issues which are sometimes buried under the dominance of mainstream media. With an adequate research, a certain issue which is sometimes overlooked can be made heard. This will give some advantages to the students: their sensitivity to local issues, their research skill, and their imagination are honed and refined.

## **5. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The writings based on research and not limited to the prescribed formula prove to be more entertaining and dramatic, compared to the writings based on experience. The students have some freedom to explore his thought and to make it dramatic. To some extent, what the students do can also make some local voices heard and paid attention to.

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